

Looking at K-Pop¹ as an I-fan²: a Reflection of Mesmerizing yet Imperfect Identities

A Senior Distinction Thesis
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¹ Short for Korean Popular Culture

² Short for international fan

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Abstract

In the past decade, Korea has become the new powerhouse of popular culture within Asia, and Korean Popular Culture, short for K-Pop, is gaining popularity worldwide. Thanks to the Internet and digital media, people across the globe are able to participate in this growing phenomenon. Based on interviews of international fans (I-fans) and ethnographic fieldwork in South Korea, this thesis explores why international K-Pop fans want to consume K-Pop and the difficulties they face as consumers who do not belong to the culture on the first place. By examining music videos, reality shows, commercials and celebrity endorsements, I illustrate that K-Pop is commodifying Korean culture into something that captures fans worldwide. In addition, I draw upon Korean history and theories of fetishization, mirror phase and male gaze to connect K-Pop with Korea's fixation over perfection and chastity. Finally, I argue that K-Pop's appeal lies upon its ability to reflect the vulnerabilities and struggles the younger generations face in society today.

TO K-Pop lovers,
Who are or were once afraid of embracing their identity as a fan,
... because it is nothing to be ashamed of.

TO my parents,
Who are trying to understand my passion in Korean Culture,
... because everyone yearns to be understood.

TO those like me,
Who have yet to make sense of who they are,
... because you are not alone.

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Introduction

벌써 2 집 나는 안 털어 빈집
 This is already my second album – I don't release empty albums/I won't rob an empty house³
 내 랩은 그녀 침실 널 데려가 눕히지 ye I'm busy
 My rap is what makes the ladies come to the bedroom – Yeah, I'm busy
 내 비즈니스에 머니꽃이 피지 난 쉬지않아 내 노랜 건물을 올리지- (I love it)
 Money flower blooms on my business, I won't rest, my songs stack up higher than buildings⁴ (I love it)
 조그만 놈이 나와 무대를 휘휘 저어
 This tiny guy comes on stage and stirs everything up
 맘에 영 안 들어 눈에 밝혀 고갤 돌려도
 Can't seem to like him, but can't get over him.
 이리저리 가는 곳곳 음악에 사진으로 도배돼
 But everywhere I go, I hear his music and see his pictures.
 미친척해도 없어서 못팔아 나 땀에 못살아?
 Even though he pretends to be crazy, "there isn't enough copies [of his music] to sell"
 You can't live because of me?⁵

Get back 이걸 장난아냐 young and rich thats 나란 말야
 Get back. I'm not kidding. Young and rich, that describes me.
 so Im fast so what its okay 지금 장난하냐? 나 장난아냐
 So I'm fast, so what, it's okay. "Are you kidding right now?" I'm not kidding.

라라라 예쁘게 좀 봐주세요 욕하지 말아주세요
 Lalala. Please look at me with loving eyes. Please don't curse at me.
 라라라 귀엽게 받아주세요 사랑해주세요
 Lalala. Please accept me in a cute way. Please love me.

(Hello) Yes sir, I'm one of a kind
 난 재주많은 곰, (no) 곰보단 여우
 I'm a bear that can do a lot tricks⁶. No, more like a fox⁷.
 (Hello hello hello) Yes sir, I'm one of a kind

³ "I won't rob an empty house" is a wordplay which can also mean "I don't release empty albums." Robbing an empty house implies that G-Dragon doesn't feel the need to copy his music from anyone since other artists are all "empty" anyway.

⁴ Another wordplay which also means "my songs make everyone cry."

⁵ This stanza starts off with a quotation probably said by other haters. The last line is G-Dragon sarcastically stating, "So you just can't live without me, huh?"

⁶ There is a Korean proverb that says, "The bear does the trick, the human gets the money." It means the one who gets the benefit of hard work isn't always the one who performs the work.

⁷ In Korean folklore, the fox often outwits the bear. In the song, G-Dragon might be indicating that while he does that hard work, he is not as dumb as the bear because he learns how to reap his benefits like a fox.

난 재수없는 놈, (wuh) 좀 비싼 몸(get out)
I'm a douche bag. What. 'Cause I'm quite expensive. Get out.

– G-Dragon “One of a Kind” from G-Dragon First Mini Album “One of a Kind” (Daum 뮤직)

When G-Dragon⁸ (G.D.) turns his back to the audience and walks back to the center of the stage, the prelude of “One of a Kind” blasts in our ears. “We’re just wild and young, we’re just wild and young...” The fans start screaming even louder than before. G.D. slowly rotates to face the audience again, swinging his long white tunic and howls into the microphone. “YES SIR, I’M ONE OF A KIND...” The whole concert hall chants the first few lines of the song with G.D. The temperature of the performance has reached a new high, matching the six back-up dancers who are showing off their sweaty bare chests and flowery pants. While G.D. delivers his autobiographic rap with precision and overflowing amount of swag, the supporters are swaying their yellow crown-like light sticks (the official concert light stick for BIGBANG, the group that G.D. belongs to) to the strong down beats of the song. “Get back, I’m not a joke. Young and rich, that describes me” G.D. stylishly struts backwards and does the “I’m driving a Ferrari” motion. G.D. adjusts his stance, repositioning his blinged-out cane, and screams into the microphone, “Make some noooooiise!” “*Aahhhhhhhh!!*” His request is immediately fulfilled by the VIPs (the official name of BIGBANG followers) shrieking from all directions. He rewards his fans with his signature dance move by agilely and smoothly jerking his hips from one side to another, raising and twisting his two arms at the same time. And the screaming continues.

This all happened in this past summer on a beautiful evening of May 17th when G-Dragon had his first solo concert in Hong Kong. I was amongst the 10,000 fans who lined up at

⁸ His stage name is derived from his birth name 지용 [Jiyoung]. 지 sounds like “G” and 용 stands for dragon in Korean. Hence the name G-Dragon.

the box office or stayed in front of the computer for hours just in order to get the limited concert tickets (ranging from \$60 to \$200), just so we can get a glimpse of our favorite oppa⁹ performing. You might ask, what about G-Dragon makes him so mesmerizing? There are so many parts to it: the self-confidence that is oozing out of him at all times, his undeniable talent in rapping, composing, and lyrics writing, his fearlessness in trying new concepts, his trend-setting fashion sense, his radiant face, his androgynous look, the way he carries himself... just about every single part of him. In fact, the very lyrics from his “One of a Kind” rap sums it up pretty well. Although he is neither tall nor built like a typical Korean pop star, nor does he have the typical tall straight nose and round puppy eyes, this “tiny guy” somehow manages to “stir everything up” whenever he shows up on stage. He has a type of stage presence that others can never mimic and will manage to stay in your mind after watching him perform just once. Being one of the most popular K-Pop star of his time, G-Dragon earns a fortune with his music – he sold over 200,000 physical albums for “One of a Kind” in 2012 (Allkpop 2013a) and attracted over 550,000 international fans to attend his 2013 world tour concerts (YGLife 2013). He is not kidding when he says that he’s “young and rich;” his album always sell out.

In his solo works, one can see that he promotes a specific way of life – one that is filled with self-confidence and fearlessness. His multiple tattoos speak about the lifestyle even more clearly. He has “too fast to live, too young to die” (a line from his song “The Leaders”) on the back of his right shoulder, “vita dolce” (sweet life in Italian) on inner left arm, “moderato” (Italian music term for moderate tempo) on his inner right arm, the two combine to be “living a sweet life moderately,” (dini 2014) and a large “Forever Young” in cursive down the right side of his chest and waist. While G-Dragon seems so undaunted about everything on earth, he is worried about one thing: losing the love of his fans. As seen from the lyrics, he pleads his fans

⁹ 오빠 (pronounced oh-BBA), the Korean term for female to address an older brother.

to “look at [him] with loving eyes” and to “love [him].” Doesn’t it make you love him a bit more since a powerful man like him shows off his weakness? The fans for G-Dragon are not only like spinach for Popeye, but also like kryptonite to Superman. We are the ones who ultimately decide to support him forever or to abandon him the next day.

While I am reminiscing about attending my first G-Dragon concert and talking about him as if he is my boyfriend, I am fully aware that I have never and might never meet him in person. All I can ever do is support him through purchasing his music, his official goods, and the items he endorses. Even though the distance between G-Dragon (or any Korean pop star) and I is largely mediated through my computer screen, I still feel his presence in my life and I continue to follow his works. Why is that the case? What is it about these glamorous celebrities make me and other fans continue to follow Korean pop music and drama, even if we are not native Koreans ourselves? How do music videos, reality shows, commercials and celebrity endorsements play into attracting the fans and educating the fans about Korean culture? How do international fans contribute to this huge cycle? What does Korean popular culture mean to these fans?

This ethnographic study of Korean popular culture (in short K-Pop) examines what it means to be passionate about K-Pop as an international fan and how different aspects of K-Pop – music, videos, television shows and commercials – play a role in fetishizing and commodifying Korean culture into something captures fans worldwide. I aim to use my interviews to further understand why international K-Pop fans want to consume K-Pop and the difficulties they face as someone who do not belong in the culture on the first place. These American/European fans obtain a unique position because they grew up witnessing and consuming the biggest cultural commodification in the world (Hollywood). Their insights help

me examine K-Pop in a different angle. I want to highlight the labor that fans put into supporting their idols and also the relationships they gained from these experiences.

Additionally, through the analysis of K-Pop, I demonstrate that K-Pop is not merely a trend that came out of nowhere, but it reflects ideals rooted in Korean colonial history and act as a tool that promotes and challenges the Korean societal values.

I. Literature Review

A number of concepts are integral to understanding Korean popular culture. The Korean Wave, also known as Hallyu¹⁰, is a conscious effort prompted by the South Korean government to increase the country's soft power. In 1994, the Presidential Advisory Board on Science and Technology submitted a report to then South Korean President Kim Young-Sun, presenting that Hollywood blockbuster *Jurassic Park* garnered a revenue worth the sales of 1.5 million Hyundai cars (Shim 2006:32). The board thus suggested the government to “promote media production as the national strategic industry” (Shim 2006:32). The comparison of a foreign film to the very creation that embodies the “pride of Korea” transformed the public's mindset of “culture as an industry” (Shim 2006:32). Suddenly, the idea of cultural production became a household topic in Korea. In other words, K-Pop is a “commodification of culture” (9), a term introduced by John L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff in *Ethnicity Inc* (2009). Similar to the African and South American countries that market their tribal identity to the tourists, South Korea markets its unique fusion of Eastern and Western way of life to the younger generations through Internet. Thus, South Korea began its “ethnicity industry” (Comaroff 2009:16) through the establishment of Cultural Industry Bureau, state research agencies and the implementation

¹⁰ It stands for 한류, literally Korean Flow. The term was adopted from Chinese (韓流) when Chinese journalists were writing about China's growing interest in Korean Popular Culture.

of multiple media policies¹¹. In fact, many of the strategies employed were aimed to replicate what is done in Hollywood. On the front page of Korea's Tourism Board, one can see the "Hallyu Today" column right in the center of the page, signifying its importance. As Comaroffs (2009) points out, commodification is the "pursuit of authenticity... a means in the quest of true self" (9). K-Pop demonstrates the "objectification of identity" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009:2) through incorporating its strong sense of nationalism and values in many of its cultural productions. However, it is important to question if the "true self" being presented by K-Pop is representative of all the faces of Korea.

Speaking of the commodification, Karl Marx's work "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof" is equally important in this conversation. According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "fetish" stands for "a strong and unusual need or desire for something." There is no doubt that K-Pop world is a place where fetishization of human bodies, personal characters, and materialism exists. However, Marx's concept of fetishization refers to "an object that is believed to have magical powers." Marx comments that human beings living under capitalism have a fetish for commodities because we blindly assign social values to items without realizing and understanding the process. Commodity becomes "magical" in the sense that they seem to be independent from the people who produced them. In his words: "A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, [...] because the relation of the producers and the sum total of their own labor is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labor" (320).

Although Marx's theory was based on the analysis of factory labor, the concept can be applied on K-Pop as well. Marx is arguing that commodities (any object with a value and in this

¹¹ This include the Motion Picture Promotion Law in 1995 that protects the local film industry by restricting all movie theatres in South Korea so that they can only play international films for a certain number of days.

case, cultural products) are now related to each other through the social relation and sum of the labor they put in, not the use-value. As discussed above, K-Pop is a type of cultural or ethnic commodity. It echoes what Marx describes about commodities because no one can clearly explain how each item is priced, why a music video from one K-Pop group is worth more than another when neither of them have an actual use-value. Yet, these cultural products – the TV dramas, the concert posters or ringtones – are valuable only because fans desire them. A BIGBANG’s concert ticket is more expensive than a 2PM’s concert ticket¹² not because one team worked physically harder than the other, but because fans are willing to pay more because they see value in one over the other. Therefore, the relationship between fans and the celebrities and the process through which fans labor to obtain their idols’ labor is worth exploring. Moreover, we need to look into the factors that affect how fans and the Korean general public assign values to K-Pop and its products.

Jacques Lacan’s theory on “mirror phase” can help us understand one of the reasons why celebrity world appears so desirable. Lacan’s theory is a reading of Sigmund Freud’s work on ego. When infants first come in contact with a mirror, they do not immediately realize that the image in the mirror is actually themselves. Instead, they believed that the mirror image is an idealized version of themselves because the image appears complete and in-control, when compared to the fragmented and powerless perception of their body (since babies are physiologically incapable of controlling many of their body parts). As Elizabeth Grosz (1990) summarizes, “the mirror stage is a compensation for the child’s acceptance of lack” (32) since it gratifies them by providing a “promise or anticipation of (self)mastery and control the subject lacks” (32). Lacan argues that this begins the process of generating an “internalized psychic

¹² According to my research, BIGBANG (debuted in 2006) sells concert tickets with a range from \$50 to \$300 when they had their concert in LA, \$62-215 for the Hong Kong leg. Whereas 2PM (debuted in 2008) sold their tickets for \$48-\$177 in their Hong Kong leg (they did not hold individual concert in US).

sensory image of the self” (32) where the things in one’s mind is more perfect and the relations established are more “fantasied” (32). Moreover, the child builds his/her ego based on that idealized image one sees in the mirror. Eventually, the mirror phase will past and the child will come to realize that the image in the mirror is actually herself. Thus, she has to confront the gap between the ideal self-projected on the mirror and the actual imperfect self in reality.

Unfortunately, this confrontation does not end, but “lack, gap, splitting will be [a human’s] mode of being” (35). We always strive to complete that gap, sometimes through fantasizing and sometimes through seeking for an indentificatory image. The attractive and capable celebrities become a mirror image for many; they become the subjects of fantasy and the standard that others constantly attempt to achieve by filling their lacks. This concept is crucial to analyzing the K-Pop products and also fans.

In addition, Laura Mulvey’s analysis of Hollywood films through psychoanalysis is helpful to comprehend how audiences consume media. In “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (2009), Mulvey argues that cinema offers two major types of pleasures. First is scopophilia, “in which looking itself is a source of pleasure” (16). She references Freud’s notion of scopophilia, which he associates with “taking other people as objects, subjecting them to a controlling and curious gaze” (Mulvey 2009:17). Thus, the audiences derive pleasure and a sense of power by viewing others as objects. The second is narcissism, “pleasure in being looked at” (17); the audience identifies with the actors in the movie as surrogates of themselves. Furthermore, films are not merely made to be watched, but they are there to create “an illusion of looking into a private world” (Mulvey 2009:17). The audiences are invited into the story and actively witness the story of each character. Although Mulvey’s theory is based from cinematography, I believe that K-Pop music, with its heavy emphasis in visual components like

music video and dance, employs similar narrative tools as cinematography does. Most performances have a theme, or so-called a “concept,” which is demonstrated through the costumes, the dance choreography (usually including moves that relates to the concept), the music video storyline, the performance stage background etc. All elements contribute to a larger story that the artists want their audience to be engaged in, on top of the music and lyrics. Thus, watching a K-Pop performance is “looking into a private world” – the private world that the artists are trying to convey through a complex set of images and sounds.

The concept of “gaze” (Mulvey 2009:17) is extremely important in Mulvey’s argument; it acts as the tool through which the audience can assert power, derive pleasure, and expose one’s vulnerabilities. After all, humans are constantly gazing at others, gazing at ourselves and gazed by others. Mulvey (2009) introduces the term “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). She argues that within cinema, there is always an imbalanced gendered binary where males are active figures and females are passive. Women’s role is being “looked at” by the characters within the narrative and the spectators in the cinema. Besides, women serve as a constantly reminder of castration threat (since women lack the phallus, the symbol of power). In her words, women are “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning” (Mulvey 2009:15). They are in the movie in order to help the storyline along (and often times slow down the narrative), not to make decisions and move the story plot along. On the other hand, males lead and push the narrative forward by taking actions that leads to changes and significances. Thus, the viewers automatically identify with the main male protagonist instead of the female.

While men are supposed to be onlookers who derive pleasure from gazing at women, they are continuously frustrated due to women’s mere existence as a castrated gender. There are two ways for men to escape the castration anxiety: either blaming and punishing women for

it or disavowing castration by fetishizing them. In Mulvey's (2009) words, men can "[counterbalance the trauma invoked] by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object" (22). This unspoken guideline is often seen in the movies endings: the female lead either dies (as a form of punishment) or she gets married to a man (as a form of salvation). The other way is through "fetishistic scopophilia" where men transform women into "something satisfying in itself" (22). Other than punishment and salvation, classic cinema also displaces the castration threat through fetishizing women into "hyper-polished objects" (Smelik 492). In Smelik's words, "fetishizing the woman deflects attention from female 'lack' and changes her from a dangerous figure into a reassuring object of flawless beauty" (492). Therefore, men can satisfy and reassure themselves that women are not threatening but tantalizing. Nonetheless, women will forever remain as the icon of pleasure or a place of power assertion for men.

However, Mulvey's theory is lacking – what happen the female viewers? What do their gazes represent and whom do they identify with in the movie? Mulvey addresses the problem in "Afterthoughts on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (2009) with Freud's theory on pre-Oedipus phase. Mulvey (2009) believes that women spectators have two possible options: she either identifies with the female object of desire and feel defeated; or she can temporarily take on a "trans-sex identification" (34) through which she identifies with the male gaze. Freud suggests that girls in the pre-phallic phase (before ~6 years old) have daydreams that "concentrate on the erotic ignores his own position" (Mulvey 2009:35). Thus, young girls' libido/erotics are familiar with ignoring their passive positions by imaging themselves being "active" (Mulvey 2009:35). Mulvey takes Freud's concept of "'masculinity' in women" as a sign that women are accustomed to identifying with the men's point of view, ever since they were young. Mulvey further discusses that certain movie genres, like Westerns and melodramas

often provide split hero characters – one who adopts the social norm and become repressed through marriage and one who defies social demands through resistance (Mulvey 2009:36). In the end of the story, the character with the conventional lady-like attributes will win and the masculine character will “drops out of the social order” (Mulvey 2009:38) due to her inability to find the correct femininity that the world wants. Mulvey argues that these characters are employed to create “image of oscillation,” which refers to the time when women alternate between their feminine or masculine egos depending on the situation. The masculine characters help female audiences regress back to their memories of the active masculine phase; the feminine character eventually grounds the female audiences back to the identities that they are expected to portray.

II. Project Intent and Methods

My thesis started out as a summer project inspired by the Advertising and Society class I took in spring 2013. I have always been intrigued by Korea’s heavy reliance on celebrity endorsement in advertising ever since I started following K-Pop; thus, I applied for funding to conduct research on Korean advertising in summer 2013. I set out to examine the images of idol spokespersons, the association between the idol’s gender and the products he/she endorses, and the gender roles that are portrayed within advertisements. I spent a week at Myeongdong, Seoul, Korea, one of the most renowned shopping districts in Seoul. Other than observing what was happening on the buzzing streets, I also surveyed television commercials during my stay. I surveyed close to 600 commercials across nine television channels ranging from 10am to midnight. I recorded down the basic information of the commercial, whether a celebrity/celebrities are featured in the commercial, the gender of the people in the commercial and additional notes about what people are doing within the commercial. The surveying leads

me to confirm some of my hypothesis regarding the gender roles while also leads me to discover new findings. Also, I photographed advertisements from local magazines, posters and billboards in public that are noteworthy.

After the short-term research, I stayed in Seoul to attend a 6 weeks study abroad session at Yonsei University. During my stay in Korea, I managed to participate in different K-Pop related events, ranging from visiting different K-Pop entertainment companies, watching music show pre-recording, watching live music show recording and attending a K-Pop concert. While I went to these events with the spirit of a fan, the experiences later turned into valuable fieldwork that I will draw on in this thesis.

After I returned to Duke, I had trouble expanding the original topic of research – Korean popular culture in advertising – into a longer piece of work. After talking to my advisor, I realized that what I want to explore is not advertising in itself but the attraction of K-Pop stardom, how it operates and what ideals it promotes. Advertising is simply a window through which I can use to peer into this fascinating sphere. In that sense, my fieldwork actually started when I first fell in love with K-Pop back in my junior year in high school.

My interest in K-Pop began as an extension of my interest in Taiwanese popular culture (music, drama and TV shows) back in 2006. My cousin introduced me to a Korean variety show called “We Got Married,” in which the program pairs up celebrities as couples and assign them missions that will facilitate their imaginary marriage. This reality show is still running to this day. Given that dating amongst celebrities is a total taboo in Korean popular culture, the show provides essential breeding ground for fantasy and also reveals the natural side of the idols, given that they are asked to carry out mundane tasks like shopping for groceries and going on dates. I was immediately attracted by “We Got Married”’s creativity and the program’s ability

to turn something so dream-like into reality. I personally find Korean popular music, drama and TV shows to be “spicier” and more entertaining than Taiwanese counterparts. Somehow each Korean program stands out with their distinct style, something that is not often seen in Taiwan and Hong Kong shows. Ever since “We Got Married,” I have continued to follow K-Pop closely by consuming K-Pop music, watching Korean dramas, viewing Korean variety shows and reading K-Pop related news. I also began learning K-Pop dances personally and through classes. In addition, I am active on a few different fan sites and am running a few fan pages too. Language is also an essential gateway to understanding a culture. Due to my strong interest in Korean culture, I started learning Korean two and a half years ago. Looking back, I believe the past five years that I spent on consuming Korean popular cultural products is not merely for entertainment purposes; it slowly builds up my knowledge bank of K-Pop and leads me to develop my own sets of questions and concerns for this matter.

Once I refocused my thesis topic, I began conducting interviews with K-Pop fans from America and Hong Kong. I met some of my interview subjects through school (both at Duke and Yonsei), and my friends also referred me to other interviewees. I carried out seven individual interviews, one focus interview with three subjects and a second focus interview with six subjects. All 16 subjects are college students or recent graduates with ages between late teens and mid-twenties; they have different ethnic backgrounds, have been in contact with K-Pop for different length of time (since birth to under a year) and feature a range of activeness within the K-Pop fan community. I interviewed them about their views on Korean popular culture, what part of K-Pop interests and attract them, and their views on different aspects within K-Pop celebrity and fan culture.

In addition, this thesis encompasses the knowledge and theories I have explored throughout my four years at Duke. The ethnography has Cultural Anthropological elements because I employed participation observation, interviews and other cultural theories; I also analyzed an East Asian matter through the lens of Women's Studies. Overall, this work is not merely a piece of scholarly work on K-Pop, but an explication to make sense of my passion in Korean culture, feminism and my identity as a whole.

III. Chapter Progression

This work begins with an introduction to Korean Popular Culture through looking at the inner workings of the K-Pop Music industry. In Chapter One, I outline the history of K-Pop and the aspects that made it a globalized trend today. Through unpacking terms like “The Big Three,” “slave contracts,” “member roles” etc., I provide detailed explanation on how a Korean idol is trained and developed, the close monitoring of their activities within the different entertainment agencies, and how they promote their work through heavy reliance of mass media. Additionally, I use interviewee's comments to demonstrate that consuming K-Pop is a transformative experience since international fans end up learning the Korean language, culture, and customs to further understand K-Pop, which in turn deepens their interest in not just the music but culture of Korea.

Chapter Two is a close analysis of Korean advertisements and how they display K-Pop's obsession with bodily perfection. Korean celebrities' impeccable look distorts the society's standard of beauty. The high percentage of celebrity-endorsement in Korea shows that a celebrity's positive image and their physical attractiveness are powerful and can be transferred onto commodities as well. Their open embracement of plastic surgery further encourages the Korean public and K-Pop fans to alter their bodies if they are not satisfied with them. In

addition, I investigate the relationship between Korea's oppressive colonial history and its fascination with looks. I end the chapter with interviews to demonstrate how international fans battle with the K-Pop's unhealthy focus on image instead of talent.

In Chapter Three, I examine the role of women in Korea and the pressure they face through K-Pop song lyrics, music video and ads. I use Laura Mulvey's theory on male gaze to analyze 4Minute's "Mirror Mirror," which reduces the role of females (idols) to beautiful meaning-bearing objects. Popular female celebrities are seen promoting the qualities, identities and lifestyles of pure, innocent virgins, possibly due to the influence from Korea's colonial past. Moreover, I outline Seungwook Moon's argument on Korea being a masculine nation and juxtapose his work with K-Pop's latest (some successful but mostly failed) attempts at introducing women as the leader of Korean culture.

My fourth chapter investigates how reality television shows play an essential role in K-Pop culture: not only because they provide immense pleasure to the audience, but also because it allows Korean celebrities to demonstrate a more down-to-earth side to their fans and promote Korean culture to the international fans. By looking at "We Got Married," I show that Korea is slowly moving away from the traditional views of love and marriage to a more casual and "confluent" type of love, as Giddens theory describes. Furthermore, I apply Janice Radway's theory on romance novel to "We Got Married" to demonstrate that the show provides fans a place to imagine falling in love with celebrities.

In my last chapter, I turn to my personal experiences and interviews to analyze the role of international fans in K-Pop fandom. Through out my interviews, I repeatedly find international fans emphasizing the difficulties of openly embracing the identity of a K-Pop fan in America. They believe that K-Pop is so transformative and exclusive that it made it hard for

outsiders to understand their passion. In addition, I propose the idea that K-Pop culture heavily employs the concept of branding; different fans groups and community have very different culture within. International fans do not identify with local Korean fans because they believe they are different from them. My interviewees emphasize that they are always more forgiving than the local fans when their favorite idols make mistakes or get into scandals, and less possessive with their idols' private lives. They view the Korean celebrities not just as glamorous idols, but also as human.

Instead of provide an all-encompassing answer as to why K-Pop is so captivating, I attempt to illustrate that it is the complexity, contradictions and imperfections within K-Pop that makes it realistic and charming at the same time.

Chapter 1

“Into the New World¹³”: Introduction to Historical and Cultural aspects of Korean Popular Culture

Through the eyes of a K-Pop Lover

Roaming around Seoul, I felt a sense of uncanny familiarity or even perhaps a sense of belonging. The truth was I had never been to South Korea. But little things left and right seemed to always trigger the feeling of déjà vu. “Ah, this is what it is like to take the subway in Seoul,” I thought to myself while scanning my “T-Money” (a rechargeable transportation card) at the subway gate. After all, I had watched countless scenes of drama characters taking the subway so doing it in person made this mundane act a little more enchanting. Whenever I sat down at a coffee shop table to wait for my friend, I felt like I was reenacting one of those romantic dates in the dramas — if only my friend were a rich and handsome son from a chaebol¹⁴ family.

Walking down the streets in Hongdae or Myongdong, my friends and I tried to sing along with the K-Pop songs that are blasting from shop to shop. During the weekends, we visited stores that celebrities opened or places that they frequently visited, hoping to get a glimpse of our favorite idol in person. Other days, we went to locations where our favorite dramas were shot so that we could take a bunch of selcas¹⁵ to prove that we went to Korea. Eventually, we had a full album of ourselves with various idols – life-size idols that are printed on cardboards, idols on the billboard, idols on the subway station wall, idols on a water bottle etc. Looking back, living in Seoul as a K-Pop fan was especially rewarding and bedazzling. Every day I felt like I was putting something I had learn from K-Pop music videos, dramas and TV shows to use. In

¹³ This is the name of popular Korean girl group Girl’s Generation (소녀시대)’s debut song.

¹⁴ Chaebol (재벌) refers to the family-run business conglomerates in Korea. These multinational corporations usually own many enterprises around the world. Famous companies like Samsung, LG, Hyundai and Lotte are all chaebols. A lot of the main characters of Korean dramas involve second generations of chaebol families.

¹⁵ Selca (셀카) is a slang shortened from “self-camera picture.” It is the Korean way of saying “selfie.”

different corners of the city, I found these K-Pop havens where I immediately shared [a](#) sense of connection.

Going to Korea reinforced the questions I always [had](#) regarding my identity. Born and raised in Hong Kong, I have always called the vibrant, international city home. However, after being educated in United States for 8 years (high school and college), I began to experience what Asian Americans undergo – the feeling of being “in limbo” – neither recognized as an authentic American nor connected to the people and trends in Hong Kong. Ever since I started following K-Pop, I believed that I was born in the wrong country. I have been a fish out of the water [for](#) the past 22 years. For reasons I cannot explain, Korean Culture [refreshes](#) me, Korean language [comes naturally](#) to me, the country suits me so well. Despite how comfortable I feel in the culture, I am an outsider looking in and I must confront the issue of cultural appropriation.

Cultural Appropriation

To better understand the concept of [cultural](#) [appropriation](#), it is helpful to first look at the definition of “appropriation” in Oxford English Dictionary: “The making of a thing private property... taking as one's own or to one's own use.” Similarly, cultural appropriation refers to the adoption of certain elements within a culture by another ethnic or cultural group. The term is broad and can refer to acculturation and assimilation of cultural elements, like religion, art, language and social behaviors.

When talking to international fans of K-Pop, I am reminded that K-Pop fans often undergo cultural appropriation. While many might consider K-Pop as a type of music genre, a lot of my interviewees mention that entering the K-Pop world is a transformative experience. One will start learning the many Korean words (usually spelt out in English) that other fans use,

or the concepts and themes that run throughout the Korean culture. The two quotes below can further demonstrate their sentiments:

“When you start listening to K-Pop, [you will realize that] it transcends just music. You will learn about everything in Korean culture. In the K-Pop subculture, you learn so much [Korean] vocabulary, and you are engrossed in a completely different culture than the one you’re in.” – Bea

“Most of [my friends] are not into [K-Pop], they do not get that or they haven’t started getting into it either. And it’s just like [K-Pop] takes up so much of my time that it’s a big part of my life. (Unison agreement amongst the focus group) So like when people ask me “you get it (in a questioning tone)?” I am like (exclaimed) “Yea! You get it!” - Alison

K-Pop is mesmerizing and addicting because it differs from the mainstream Western popular culture. Iwabuchi (2001) explains that regionally circulating popular cultural products provide “a sense of living in shared time and common experience of a certain (post)modernity which cannot be represented well by American popular culture” (56). K-Pop is appealing because it presents a “common experience” that is unique to East Asia only. Becoming a devoted fan of K-Pop [first](#) requires understanding and [immersing](#) oneself in that very “experience.”

However, cultural appropriation is often controversial because the lines between [two](#) cultures are often blurred so it is difficult to pinpoint the core elements of a culture. Besides, cultural appropriation can involve misrepresentation and subordination by the outsider culture. The topic of offense and respect comes into play. In *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*, editors James O. Young and Susan Haley (2009) summarizes the problem, “the act of appropriation can be wrong precisely because it fails to indicate due respect for a culture, its beliefs, its values or its members” (6). In fact, people have called out K-Pop artists and entertainment companies for disrespecting and misrepresenting other cultures (for example, Native American culture and African-American culture) in their concepts. The term can carry a

negative connotation when the subject of appropriation is a minority culture or that it is subordinated to the outsider culture.

Given that this thesis involves a non-Korean looking at Korean popular culture through international fans, I am fully aware that I am at risk of offending members of Korean culture. However, that is the same risk international fans have to face when they are partaking as a part of the K-Pop movement. While I am not claiming that I know about Korea more than a Korean, international fans provides an unique perspective where we have been consumers of another cultural product before K-Pop. I also hope to show that K-Pop fans can be and should be critical of what they are consuming. Although we treasure K-Pop, it does not mean we should be blindly following and accepting everything we see. We should take advantage of our distinctive position within the K-Pop community, reflect upon and voice our insights.

The goal of this chapter is to help the readers understand the world of Korean Popular Culture where K-Pop fans like my interviewees and I devote immense amount of time and energy. In doing so, the readers get to undergo an [eye-opening](#) journey that each and every K-Pop fan experienced when they first engage with the culture. Only by attempting to grasp the seemingly invisible complexity of K-Pop, [can](#) readers begin to see why fans around the world find it so fascinating. First, I will provide a brief introduction to Korean Pop history and its Japanese and American popular music influences. Afterwards, I aim to familiarize my readers with some of the essential jargons K-Pop fans use in their conversations. These essential words shed light onto the basic structure, values and standards of Korean [popular culture](#). Moreover, the terms will demonstrate how certain aspects of the Korean popular culture like entertainment companies, fan culture, and celebrity entities are vastly different from other popular cultures around the world. Korean culture and its nuances may be foreign and complicated. Yet, greater

understanding can reveal how a culture can spellbind fans around the world. It may be best to start at the beginning – the emergence of Korean media to the international stage.

I. The Rise of Hallyu

Hallyu, or Korean wave, began in Asia in the late 1990s. It could not have happened without Korean film industry's motivation to compete against Hollywood and the neighboring countries' willingness to accept Korean cultural products. Until 1987, only domestic film companies were allowed to import foreign movies in Korea; but under U.S. pressure, the Korean government allowed Hollywood studios to distribute films in Korea directly in 1988 (Shim 2006:31). Overshadowed by foreign influences, Korean local film and television industry experienced a severe hit. Things began to change when unexpected production of certain local blockbusters, like *Sopyonje* in 1993, *Shiri* in 1999 and *Joint Security Area* in 2000, emerged. These bestsellers not only attracted local audience back to the Korean film industry, they also awaken the citizens' pride and interest in the Korean culture.

Along with movies, Korean television dramas contributed immensely to the rise of Hallyu. It all began when the national China Central Television Station (CCTV) aired a Korean drama *What is Love All About?* in 1997. The show was so popular that "CCTV re-aired the program in 1998 during a prime-time slot, and recorded the second-highest ratings ever in the history of Chinese television" (Shim 2006:28). Since then, productions like *Stars in My Heart* (1999), the *Endless Love* Series, including *Winter Sonata* (2002) generated unforeseen interest in the Korean culture. These dramas are broadcasted not only in Asia, but also in Latin America (like Brazil and Mexico), Middle East (Israel) and Europe. Among Asian countries, the heavy export of Korean dramas provided a chance for local audiences to learn about the cultural affinities and family values Korea shares with other Asian countries (Choe 2006). In fact,

revenue from exporting Korean television programs increased from \$12.7 million to \$101.6 million in the span of 6 years (1999 to 2005) (Kim and Park 2008:137). According to the Korean Tourism Organization (KTO), visitor arrivals to South Korea increased from two million in 1988 to five million in 2000 and broke the nine million mark in 2011. The article specifically mentions “the continued growth of the Japanese and Chinese markets [is] primarily due to the attraction of Korea’s Hallyu tourism brand image” and [the](#) increased awareness has contributed greatly in drawing more visitors generally (Korea Tourism Organization).

Last but [not](#) least, Korean popular music, short for K-Pop, pulled its weight on this Hallyu fever. Before the arrival of K-Pop, Korean music was often presented in the form of Korean ballads and Trot¹⁶ (Shim 2006:35). Everything changed when Korean households began to have the ability to buy satellite dishes to pick up Japanese stations and Star TV (Shim 2006:36). Music played on these global stations became popular. As a result, the Korean public pushed the country’s music industry to emulate the international trends. Most Koreans would agree that the originators of Korean popular music are the Seo Taiji and Boys, a three-man band composed of Seo, an underground bassist singer-songwriter, and two rapper dancers (Shim 2006:36). They released the single “I Know” in 1992, which is arguably the first rap track in Korea. Seo Taiji and Boys got immediate success because the band “creatively mixed genres like rap, soul, rock and roll, techno, punk, hardcore and even [trot]” (Shim 2006:36).

In recent years, K-Pop has reached new heights [of popularity](#) due to Internet sites like Youtube, Facebook and Twitter. According to Billboard, the Korean music industry gross over

¹⁶ Trot music is one of the oldest genres of Korean popular music that evolved from the Japanese trot music (*enka*) during Japanese colonization. The name is a shorthand for “foxtrot,” a ballroom dance, because both share a similar two-beat rhythm. The most identifiable element is the unique vocal style with heavy vibrato. To read more about Trot, see <http://seoulbeats.com/2012/08/trot-the-original-K-Pop/>. This video (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KLmT6NVkxak>) features a good representation of Trot music. This one (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GFonvbqxwew>) can help one understand the differences between Trot and K-Pop today since it features current groups performing both their K-Pop tracks and trot music.

\$3.4 billion in just the first half of 2012, which marked a 27.8% increase from same period in 2011 (Billboard 2012). K-Pop's global sales have amounted to over \$235 million (Park 2012) in 2012. K-Pop-focused Youtube channel "Premium Oppa" calls it "the internet's best-known secret" (Premium Oppa 2012) because the music genre was unknown worldwide until the rise of Youtube in the late 2000s. Thanks to the website, people around the world were able to watch K-Pop music videos, Korean dramas and movies. In fact, most Westerners get their first taste of K-Pop through PSY's 2012 single "Gangnam Style." The music video surpassed Justin Bieber's "Baby" as the most watched video on Youtube, gathering close to 2 billion views. Now K-Pop has joined the ranks of international music. Having said that, PSY is not the most representative of the Korean Pop Music genre if we compare him to the rest of the K-Pop artists. Being a solo artist who is based more on his talent than his looks, in addition to his schooling in the United States, PSY is a unique K-Pop star of his own.

II. Group (그룹)

K-Pop music is famous for producing music bands, so called a "group." These groups are almost always single-sex. The average number of members within a group is around 4 to 7, but the largest group currently is APeace that features 21 male members. The concept of these "groups" is different from the jazz or rock bands in Western culture where there is one vocalist, a guitarist, a drummer and so on. Instead, one has to come in with a different mindset; Kpop music comes in a package – including the concept, the music, the dance, the fashion, the music video etc. Producing catchy or emotive music is not enough to compete within the K-Pop World.

(i) Roles inside a group

A key aspect of K-Pop groups is that they are often structured in a similar way. Instead of recruiting members who are average at everything, entertainment companies tend to group

together members who have different skillsets. Interviewee Samantha explains, “In the K-Pop group, it’s really funny [to] me that they have role for each of the member, one is the main vocal, one is the rapper, one is the main visual and this is really special.” While each member [has](#) solid foundation in singing and dancing, [they](#) usually boast a special talent – [be](#) it singing, rapping, dancing, composing, being humorous or looking aesthetically pleasing (fans call that person the “visual” of the group). Other than that, there is a group leader; in some companies, the eldest member becomes the leader, whereas some companies choose [someone](#) who shows leadership potentials. Other than being mature and responsible, the leader is usually eloquent as he/she acts as the spokesperson for the group. Because of Korea’s heavy emphasis on age and respect for someone older, the youngest member of the group is called “막내” (maknae). While being the maknae doesn’t require any specific skill, the youngest one usually take up being cute and being babied as their character. By assigning each person a role, it helps the fans to differentiate one member from another, especially since many people find it difficult to recognize a large number of faces at first. This system also helps distribute jobs amongst the members easily: the lead vocal usually [sings](#) some solo acts, the lead dancer [does](#) extra dance performances, the funny member [goes](#) on reality show, the charismatic one [becomes the](#) MC of a music show, and so on. The member’s role denotes their duty. In addition, fans tend to identify with certain roles according to their own personality. The follow is a fan’s comment to the question “If you were to form a new boy/girl group, what will each member’s role be?”

“Their roles would be:

1: The Leader

2: The "Band Mommy"/second-in-command (think of Jaejoong from TVXQ)¹⁷

3: The Shy one (this would totally be me. i get SO camera shy)

4: The "funny" one (this is the one that tries to be funny, then gets laughed at. think of Junsu's (again, TVXQ) gags from Japanese programs)

¹⁷ The term “Band Mommy” means someone who takes care of the other members in a motherly way, usually involve cooking and nagging.

5: The Mischievous one

6: The innocent one (imagine Taemin or Changmin shortly after debut. they're so cute you want them to stay that way forever!)” (Park 2010)

As one can see from the answer above, a member's role does not necessarily have to be related to a skillset. Personality is equally important and demonstrating that personality is crucial to attracting fans. Fans tend to find the member with similar personality more attractive and familiar. In the end, it is important to remember that sometimes there isn't a role for each member (especially in large groups), but the key roles mentioned before are usually fulfilled by a member.

III. Big Three

In order to understand the hierarchy and competition between K-Pop groups – one has to know the term Big Three/3. It stands for the three biggest entertainment companies in South Korea. They are S.M. Entertainment ([also known as](#) SM) founded by heavy metal band 365 Days' member Lee Soo-Man in 1989, YG Entertainment ([also known as](#) YG) founded by previous Seo Taiji & Boys' member Yang Hyun-Suk in 1996 and JYP Entertainment ([also known as](#) JYP) by Park Jin-Young in 1997. They are considered as “big” not simply because of the large number of artists discovered and managed by these three companies, but also because they have become the benchmark for debuting high-quality boy and girl groups that usually garner immense success.

(i) Function of Agencies

Unlike Western entertainment companies that manage the distribution of music, Korean entertainment companies play a much larger role in their artists' work – the companies decide the training, music production, styling, contracting, publicity, music distribution and pretty much everything regarding the celebrity's schedule. In a way, these companies are like one-

stop-service where they take care of every step needed to make their celebrities successful. SM Entertainment founder Lee Soo-Man explains the differences between the US and the Korean entertainment system:

Even the U.S. couldn't establish a management system like ours. Picking trainees, signing a long term contract, and teaching trainees for a long period of time, this just can't happen in the U.S. U.S. agencies are hired as sub-contractors after an artist has grown and gained popularity on their own. As a result, the agencies only play roles of sub-contractors, and can't make long-term investments in singer-hopefuls.

(Lee 2011)

The key idea here is about discovering hidden talent within the trainees and transforming them into super stars. Korean entertainment companies train artists for a long period of time. Doing so ensures each individual has the characteristics for success. Due to this type of extensive star-breeding system, fans have a chance to know about the trainees within a company before they debut. Sometime, fans spot the trainees being backup dancers for the company's idol groups or see them [repeatedly](#) entering and leaving the entertainment company. Most of the time, the Big Three will leak information – a photo, a teaser video, a sound clip etc. – about a trainee to catch the public's attention. For example, SM Entertainment recently launched a new Facebook page called “SM Rookies” and featured a team of new trainees. The page received about 100,000 likes in less than 48 hours of its launch¹⁸. Within two days, fans all over the world created over 20 other Facebook pages and groups to support SM Rookies or individual trainees. The biggest fan page contains close to 20,000 fans as of December 4th, [2013](#). A lot of times, the trainees from the Big Three build up a solid fan-base way before they officially debut. Thus, [many](#) fans [have](#) followed and supported their favorite celebrity ever since their trainee days. The long-term devotion to a celebrity provides more chances for fans to [establish a](#) tight-knit community, which [leads](#) to the formation of fan clubs (will be discussed later in the paper).

¹⁸ Link: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/SMROOKIES>, page is officially launched on December 2, 2013. On December 4, 2013 at 4PM EST, there are 96,913 likes on the page.

To further secure the relationship between the fans and the celebrities, entertainment companies project an image that fans are an extended part of the company and its idols. Each company has a different term for their “project name” – meaning the term used referring to the collective gathering of all artists signed under the company. It is also a term used by fans to identify as being a support for most or all acts signed to a company (Kpop Dictionary). SM is called SM Town; YG is the YG Family and JYP is the JYP Nation. A lot of times, fans who support one artist from an entertainment company will also support other artists from that company. It eventually creates a huge network of supporters who follow anything produced by the agency.

(ii) “Slave Contracts”

Having said that, this type of all-around, comprehensive management style is lucrative because Korean trainees signed extremely long contracts with their respective agencies. The agencies will thus be able to break even sooner or later, and continue to recoup the costs of producing these idols until they are no longer popular. For example, SM Entertainment is infamously known for setting up 13 years-long contracts with its idols. Many people termed these contracts as “slave contract” as agencies utilize these contracts [to](#) “[tie] its trainee-stars into long exclusive deals, with little control or financial reward” (Williamson 2011).

Investigations found that certain agencies required their artists to consult the company about daily decisions like schooling, [friendships](#), economic activities, socializing events and even transportation. It is clear that the agency is highly involved in their artists’ personal life (Coolsmurf 2008). Given that trainees and new idols are thought to be indebted to the companies, they are placed in an even more vulnerable position and have no ability to negotiate for better conditions. The Korean Fair Trade Commission checked 354 artists from 10 major

entertainment companies and found that most of the artistes had signed [an](#) unbeneficial contract of some sort (Coolsmurf 2008). This dark side of K-Pop was revealed when three members of the longest running idol group TVXQ took its management company SM Entertainment to court because of the binding contract. In the end, the court came down on TVXQ's side and SM Entertainment was forced to shorten their idol contracts to 7 years.

(iii) Music

Music production is essential to each group. A commonality between the three company founders is that they debuted as K-Pop singers before founding the companies. Each founder's musical influence can be clearly seen in the groups that each company produced today. When studying in [the](#) United States, Lee Soo-Man was heavily influenced by the music revolution started by [the](#) MTV music channel, which put heavy emphasis on both the visual aspect and the music (Forbes 2013). His experience in [the](#) US inspired him to duplicate and introduce the entertainment system to Korea. One can easily recognize Yang Hyun-Suk's music style through the rap songs and hip-hop dance routines done by Seo Taiji & Boys. As for Park Jin-Young, his work has always been mellower than the other two artists with extremely catchy tunes and memorable concepts. In short, interviewee S summarizes, "[the three companies] all kind of have a distinct sound." She describes SM "fashions a lot of their artists after 90s American Pop, think of [N Sync](#), [Backstreet](#) Boys," whereas YGE "definitely has a hip-hop and R&B influence" and JYP is "in-between" the two styles. Other than that, each company puts out groups of different concepts and they seem to value different things. Interviewee Sally explains nicely,

"For YG, they are really famous for talented people. The YG 사장님 (meaning founder Yang Hyun Suk) really focuses on talent more than looks, as people say, and I do think that YG is trying to be different from the Korean culture. You can see from their clothes, they're more Americanized or Westernized. YG give people the general impression that they're really talented. And for SM, people think that they're more on the visuals (meaning based on one's looks). As you can see from EXO, I don't understand where

can they find 12 guys who are all handsome! *chuckle* I do agree that SM people are really good looking. They're famous for their box MV¹⁹, which means the MV is [recorded] within a set... Their music used to be really standard K-Pop music, but these days they like doing the patches music²⁰, like "Wolf" and "I Need A Boy." For JYP, they give people a warmer feeling and I think their music is JYP, as in the person Park Jin Young [’s music]."

Besides, fans often compare how the three companies are managed. An ongoing joke between K-Pop fans is that: Lee Soo Man says "Money is the best," Yang Hyun Suk says, "My artists are the best," Park Jin Young says, "I am the best"²¹. Artist Park Ji Yoon also once remarked^{ed}, "SM is like a military academy with a set standard of training that must be followed while YG is like an alternative school that focuses on the individual student. JYP is like homeschooling where Park Jin Young teaches them as he pleases" (Daum 뉴스 2013). Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Lee's company was the first to challenge the original K-Pop artist system by introducing and perfecting the way of "cloning talent and grooming pop stars" (Shim, 2006:38).

Other than the big three, there are also other well-known labels like LOEN Entertainment, Cube Entertainment, MNET Media, CJ E&M Media, Star Empire Entertainment, and many more. In 2012-2013, JYP has been experiencing financial difficulties, as seen from the closing down of its creative department in U.S.A. (Jhezwafu 2013) and also a continuous drop in ^{the} company's revenue (Bloomberg Business Week 2014). With the rise of groups like B2ST and 4minute, there has been more talk about Cube contending for the Big Four agencies (KpopStarz 2013a).

(iv) Dance

¹⁹ Box MV stands for a music video that is shot within a box setting that has one backdrop. It is serve to extenuate the elaborate dance routines of SM groups.

²⁰ Referring to a type of songs where they deliberately mixes in multiple different tunes in the same song. Listen to the two songs mentioned for a better understanding.

²¹ This is a reference to him whispering "JYP" or "JYP Production" at the beginning of every single song his musicians produce.

Synchronization is what makes K-Pop dance performances so irresistible – they emphasize on pulling off extremely complex choreography and dance formations [despite](#) the large group size. Due to the large number of members, each member usually does not get many singing lines. A lot of times, groups attempt to come up with memorable and easy to learn dance moves so that fans can record their own dance covers, which ultimately act as free promotion for the group. PSY’s “Gangnam Style” serves as a great example – the horse ride dance became a world-wide phenomenon because of its [humorous looks and its simplicity](#). Some of the other famous K-Pop dance moves include the “Sorry Sorry” move from 13 member boy band Super Junior where [the](#) boys rub their hands together to plea for forgiveness, [the](#) 9 member girl group Girl’s Generation’s “Genie” leg dance that shows off each members miles-long legs, [the](#) boy band B2ST (pronounce as Beast)’s penguin step in their song “Fiction”, Brown Eyed Girls’ hip thrusting move from “Abracadabra” (which is later used as the dance move in PSY’s “Gentleman”) and 2PM’s shuffling dance in “Again and Again.” I simply can continue to list out dance moves forever. Learning these signature dance moves is definitely something K-Pop followers enjoy.

(v) MV/Music Video

Music videos are of high production value in K-Pop because [they](#) act as a crucial form of advertisement and [a](#) way to garner interests in [a](#) group’s work. At times, a group will release multiple versions of videos with the same track – first one is the story/drama version that usually has a storyline, second is the dance version where video solely focus on the members’ choreography, sometimes there are versions that features a specific member of the group. Nowadays, there are also music videos that are made into short films (around 30 minutes in total) that feature a few songs from the group. One example is 5 people boy group SS501’s Solo

Collection Drama MV that strings together all five members' solo tracks into a story. Another way of promoting music video is to split it up in two parts, and each part can act as an individual MV for a song. Girl group T-ARA did that by narrating the first part of the story in "Day by Day's" music video, and then releasing the second part of the drama through "Sexy Love's" music video exactly two months later. This way fans will anticipate the release of the second music video and most likely watch it in order know how the story ends.

All this is just the tip of the iceberg. There is much more to the Korean popular culture and that is why K-Pop fans are constantly learning and adapting to the new trends. In the next chapter, I will narrow down my focus to look at how K-Pop celebrities promote an unachievable beauty standard within Korea through advertisements and song lyrics. Furthermore, I will demonstrate that Korea's colonial history has left a huge impact on Korea's concept of beauty and gender.

Chapter 2

Looks Are All that Matter: How Korean Idols Promote the Culture of Beauty Perfection and How International Fans React

I. South Korea's Pursuit of Perfection

Ulzzang/uljjang (얼짱) is a Korean portmanteau that combines “face” (얼굴) and “the best” (짱). The term was coined by netizens²² to describe people who are extremely attractive. In recent years, there have been laymen have become extremely popular by posting pictures of themselves on their personal websites like Cyworld or entering online beauty contests. These people may eventually become models or idols because of their looks. It is of no doubt that visual/physical image is extremely important in the Korean society.

Like everywhere else in the world, celebrities in Korea have a huge impact on the general public's perception of beauty. Public figures are often the role model for others, especially when it comes to fashion and the way to conduct one's self. In *Celebrity Sells* (2004), Hamish Pringle mentions that David Beckham's bold experimentation of different hairstyles in public allowed other men to do so in public. He demonstrates that men can be entitled to changing hairstyles just like women do: “He has shown blonde men in particular all sorts of different looks that can enhance their appearance which they might not have previously considered possible for themselves” (Pringle 17). In addition to introducing fashion trends, celebrities disclose their beauty and dieting tips through interviews in magazines and on TV. For example, eight member girl group Afterschool revealed that their secret in keeping fit is

²² Netizens refers to the general public that uses Internet, especially for those who use it habitually. The term is created by adding “Internet” and “citizens” together. While the term itself is neutral in meaning, it has a slightly negative connotation within the K-Pop world. It is a reflection of the social phenomenon in Korea where increasing number of teenagers and younger generations spend excessive amount of time in front of the computer. Due to the anonymity in Internet, certain groups of netizens are known for making outrageous and rude remarks on K-Pop or against certain idols. Many international fans perceive the Korean netizens as “crazy” or “hypocritical.”

“we eat what we want to eat, but on days we eat a lot, we manage our bodies by skipping dinner” (AllKpop 2014a). Solo singer IU shares that she only eats “1 apple for breakfast, 2 sweet potatoes or 2 bananas for lunch, and low-fat milk with added protein for dinner”; furthermore, she “exercised like crazy, and lost 5 kg in 5 days” (KpopStarz 2013b). “Banana diet,” “paper cup diet,” “watermelon diet,” etc. are all popular (and unhealthy) diets that Korean celebrities have introduced (Renee 2012).

In South Korea, there is another way of enhancing one’s beauty – plastic surgery. *The Economist* released an article in 2012 that named South Korea the country with the highest the highest number of plastic surgery operations per capita (16% of the population have received plastic surgery) (The Economist Online 2012). Some believe that plastic surgery is a way to enhance one’s chances in the work field. There are increasing social pressure for Koreans, especially young college graduates, to go under the knife before having interviews or starting their careers. Some others believe that by altering one’s looks, one “will be able to better navigate life’s challenges. This is the belief in empowerment through surgery that is prevalent in South Korea” (Kim 2014).

Celebrities play a huge role in promoting the trend because they are the ones who “scramble to keep ahead of digital technology that mercilessly exposes not only their physical imperfections, but any attempts to remedy them”, says Rando Kim, a professor of consumer science at Seoul National University. Research in other countries has shown that the “influence of celebrities on consumer attitudes towards their own appearance is becoming significant,” especially on those under the age of 35 (Pringle 2004:43). The problem is further aggravated by Korea’s many celebrity-focused publications and by mainstream tabloids that cover the topics of body shape and cosmetic surgery in their editorials.

Walking around Seoul, one can easily find ads for plastic surgery; they often feature before and after pictures of unnamed customers to showcase the life-changing transformation. While no celebrity has openly endorsed a plastic surgery company in Korea, the fact that more and more celebrities openly admit to having undergone surgery²³ promotes the act of correcting one's imperfections through surgery. In addition to the wide acceptance of surgery, idols receiving surgery establish an extremely high standard of beauty that is impossible for normal citizens to achieve. Pringle offers the example of global Hispanic and African American celebrities like Jennifer Lopez, Kylie Minogue and Serena Williams, receiving buttock implants. They not only triggered a trend in public to alter one's bottom, but their actions "crystallized the idea in the Hispanic and African American communities that their own genetic disposition towards a 'big butt' can be something to be proud off" (Pringle 2004:45). I strongly believe this can also be applied to the culture within Korea. After witnessing celebrities and perhaps role models undergoing surgery, Korean citizens began to internalize the concept that altering one's body through surgery is acceptable. Those who underwent surgery became mirror images for others, and the only way to minimize the gap between one's expectations and reality is to either accept the reality or receive surgery. Furthermore, plastic surgery has become the trademark of Korean culture and beauty. The standard of beauty is shifting from natural to manufactured. Natural features²⁴ like single eye-lid, crooked nose, wide jaws, wrinkles etc. are not considered unique; they are imperfections that must be altered. The obsession with artificial

²³ A blog that mentions a few Korean celebrities who have admitted going under the knife:
<http://blog.ningin.com/2011/05/23/9-idols-who-have-publicly-admitted-to-plastic-surgery/>

²⁴ There has been continuous debate over whether or not Koreans (and now Asians in general) are trying to become more Caucasian looking due to Westernization. I will not address this topic in the paper. However, being paler – one of the most sought-after feature – is not directly resulted from aiming to look white. It is because back in the days, people from high classes did not have to do physical labor out in the sun, resulting a paler complexion. Thus, looking pale becomes a reflection of status, not just beauty.

perfection has produced an extremely unhealthy culture. The following quote from a Korean netizen sums up the problem well:

Korea is so obsessed with looks and I really don't see anyone trying to fix it. People don't have any right to hate on plastic surgery monsters because they're the ones fostering a beauty-oriented society. If Korea was a country worth living in while ugly, who'd resort to getting plastic surgery? (NetizenBuzz 2013b)



Image 2-1. Plastic Surgery Advertisement in Korea subway station (source: livelovedream.ca)

II. The Role of Advertising and Celebrity Endorsements

(i) Understanding the basics of Advertising

Advertising is the primary means of defining beauty and image within Korea and Korean popular culture. In order to better understand the impact of advertising on its audience, it is helpful to first look at advertising's role in society. Association is a key term. Most advertisements we see involve the act of associating the product being sold with an ideology, a style, a way of life and a set of values. This is because associations often elicit more a powerful impact than words. Associations can sometimes evoke emotional and psychological feelings or memories (Pringle 2004:85) (think of all those heartwarming advertisements you have seen), which bring about a more personal impression for viewers. For example, by having an elegant and high-class model displaying a beautiful pearl necklace, consumers can immediately associate wearing that necklace with values like poshness, luxury, classiness etc. This is part of why celebrity endorsement is effective. Another way of analyzing advertisement is through

semiotics, that is, by identifying the signifier and the signified. The signifier is the object being displayed, whereas the signified is the meaning or concept conveyed by the signifier. For example, a dove is a signifier for the idea of peace (which is the signified).

According to William O'Barr (2010) in *AdText*, a celebrity endorsement is a type of commercial that features “a celebrity who speaks on behalf [of the product/company/brand].” Every celebrity has a specific profile, image and reputation, so when he/she models for and speak on behalf of a product, consumers have learned to associate that celebrity's image and style with the product.

As Pringle (2004) points out, “advertising picks up on and reflect themes and trends from society” (43); since the purpose of advertisements is to persuade viewers to buy the product they are advertising, advertisements showcase the latest products and reflect what consumers are looking for in society. In addition, ads are a “social narrative about consumption” (O'Barr 2006) because they tell the general public what should be desired and what should be consumed. If a certain product, like a smart phone, is often associated with modernity and the mainstream, then consumers will begin to believe that it is truly a product everyone living in the modern society should own.

(ii) Celebrity Endorsement

South Korea has one of the biggest celebrity endorsement cultures on earth. Since many celebrities undergo surgery to achieve looks that satisfy Korea's beauty standard, the public often considers them beautiful. For companies that want to associate attractiveness with their products (basically every company), it is most convenient to hire attractive celebrities to represent them. The abundance of idols in advertisements and commercials demonstrate that this strategy works, and it works really well; otherwise there would be no reason for companies

to continue spending so much money on hiring celebrities. It is reported that among the 2000 commercials produced in 2011, 65% featured celebrities. This is much higher than the 10% celebrity endorsement rate in western developed countries like US, United Kingdom and France (Shin 2011). According to my weeklong survey on television advertisement in June 2013, I recorded a celebrity endorsement rate ranging from 28% (3:45pm on Tuesday June 18 on TvN channel) to 93% (11:30pm on Saturday June 22 on MNet channel).

Unlike American TV, Korean broadcasts tend to group all the commercials together at the beginning (or the middle) of an hour so that audiences can enjoy their viewing experience without commercial breaks cutting off the show at the most frustrating point. In that approximately 10-15 minutes of commercial, roughly 40% of the commercials feature idols or famous people; this percentage goes up significantly during primetime. These celebrities endorse everything possible: all types of food, electronics, cars, home appliances, cosmetics, clothing brands, female products and more.

The face is extremely important in advertising. In “Advertising and face-fixing,” Fern L. Johnson (2008) states that, “the face holds power, especially the face of a woman” (109). He explains that women are socially conditioned from an early age to believe that having a clean, well-groomed and pretty face is extremely important. In Western society, a man’s face is less critical; many consider an overly-pretty and polished face as feminine or even gay (Johnson 2008:109). However, this is not the case in Korea. With a different set of beauty standards, men are expected to have relatively clean faces (showing facial hair is not a big trend in East Asia) and people do not equate delicate features with femininity²⁵. The face is so special because it is

²⁵It is important to note that definitions of “femininity” and “masculinity” are very culturally-based. Under the Western standard of beauty, people often consider affectionate behaviors, male physical contact, male grooming and less angular facial features as signs of femininity or even heterosexuality. However, the elements mentioned above are not considered “feminine” or “gay” in Korea. Metrosexual actions and androgynous looks under

the “signifiers of the image of appearance” (Johnson 2008:111) – the face is a signifier for beauty (the signified). Moreover, the face becomes the “synecdoche for total appearance” (Johnson 2008:111), meaning that the part (face) comes to represent the whole (body/person). Therefore, picking a model who has a perfect face is crucial since it signifies much more than just a face, it stands for the body, the character and even the product by association.

(iii) Ad Analysis

This advertisement series features four-member girl group 2NE1 promoting the new Canon S01 digital camera. It is obvious that they are trying to showcase how compact the camera is by placing it with the members’ already tiny faces. The ad’s copy reads: “this is the actual size of [insert member’s name] face.” And next to the camera, it says, “this is the actual size of S01.” There is also a line indicating that the camera is 51.2mm x 77mm in size. The face



not only acts as a signifier in this ad, it acts as a ruler and a model for comparison. Given that 2NE1 is a group known for being chic and edgy, they are the signifiers for those ideals. By endorsing the cameras, they transfer the ideals of chicness and trendiness onto the camera and the brand also.

Image 2-2 and Image 2-3. Girl group 2NE1 members endorsing Canon S01 camera (source: research)

Western’s standards are widely accepted within Korea, they called men with these qualities as “Flower Boys” (꽃미남). Korean actors Lee Joon Gi, Jang Geun Suk, NU’EST member Ren, TVXQ’s Kim Jae Joong are all great representation of the more “feminine” looking faces. Koreans and fans worldwide consider them as handsome. Yoseob from B2ST, Sungmin from Super Junior, Hongki from FT. Island are famous for their ability to act cute (aegyo). However, I am not claiming that Koreans dislike masculine men or only like feminine men. It is just that a wide spectrum of masculinity/femininity is celebrated within the culture.



Image 2-4 and Image 2-5. Actor Lee Jong Suk endorsing snacks (source: withjonguk.tumblr.com/¹⁾)

This ad campaign features model and actor Lee Jong Suk endorsing Nongshim Saewookkang (shrimp flavored crackers). The majority of the ads in the series do not feature

Lee with the product at all.

Instead, the ad focuses on

Lee dressing up casually and posing in front of the camera. His face is the focus more than anything else. In the bottom of the ad, it includes the slogan “Forever dearest/closest friend Saewookkang” with a tiny picture of the product. In comparison to the space Lee obtains in the layout, one might even mistake this set of ads for Lee’s personal photo shoot. In Lee’s recent work “I Hear Your Voice,” Lee portrays an innocent but smart high school student with the superpower of telepathy. Thus, Lee’s face becomes the signifier for purity, perfection and even empathy. The company hopes its consumers will associate Saewookkang with friendliness by showcasing Lee’s next-door-neighbor feel. It also conveys the idea that Lee’s look is one that

young males should aim for if they wish to be an amiable character.



Image 2-6. SM groups’ visuals endorsing SK telecom LTE network (source: <http://en.korea.com/>¹⁾)

SK Telecom launched a television

commercial campaign to promote their high-speed LTE data technology (basically 4G wireless service). The company picked out the widely accepted good-looking member(s)/the “visuals” from four different SM entertainment girl and boy bands for this “LTE Infinite Power Noot”²⁶ campaign. Yoona from Girls’ Generation, Shiwon from Super Junior, Minho from SHINee and Sulli from F(x) are all known for their looks in the K-Pop world. While the idols are featured using the cell phones and LTE service in the commercials, there are also many headshots of these idols posing next to the word LTE (image 2-7). Additionally, idols are seen explaining the service to the audience. In one commercial, there are continuous shots of celebrities explaining the advantages of LTE (image 2-8). Each celebrity is shown to be very eloquent, well-groomed and charming. Ironically, no cell phone or related technology is shown. The focus is purely on the celebrities’ faces (and the lip service they are providing).

In “Material Girl,” Susan Bordo (1997) criticizes advertisements for distorting African American consumers’ sense of beauty: “the magazine’s advertisers, however, continually play upon and perpetuate consumers’ feelings of inadequacy and insecurity over racial characteristics of their bodies. They insist that in order to be beautiful, hair must be straightened and eyes



Image 2-7 and Image 2-8. Screenshot of TV commercials of LTE (source: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6QIxALGkwM4>)

²⁶ The term “noot” is a play on when LTE is arranged vertically (as seen on the top left corner of the ad), it looks like the Korean word 놀, pronounced as *noot*.

lightened” (349). In many ways, this statement can be applied to modern American society and also Korean society. By constantly holding up celebrities who have had plastic surgery as representatives of the standard of beauty, the advertisements in Korea are limiting the definition of beauty. They are proclaiming that people who don’t have double eye-lids, a tall straight nose or a v-shaped face cannot be seen as beautiful, when a large population in Korea do not have such features to begin with. These advertisements are “perpetuating consumers’ feelings of inadequacy and insecurity” (Bordo 1997:349) over features that are supposed to be deemed “Korean” (I promise, there are some handsome male celebrities and elegant female celebrities who have single eye lids and they are charming). It reinforces the belief that mono-lids or flatter noses or more angular jaws are inherent racial/ethnic flaws. As celebrities, they are approved by the public to represent the beauty of Korea. But they, too, fall under the pressure of “externally imposed standards of worthiness” (Bordo 1997:352) and fail to stand up for their own definition of beauty.

(iii) Celebrity Product Placement



Image 2-9. Memebbers of C.N.BLUE posting with their shoes endorsement

There is another form of celebrity endorsement, which is called “celebrity product placement.” Instead of featuring a celebrity in a commercial, companies provide their products for the celebrities to use. In a sense, the celebrity is “deliberately using the brand as part of a piece of conspicuous consumption which in some way is going to benefit them” (Pringle 2004:117). The star is trying to build his/her own identity through associating with the brand/product, which in turn benefits the brand also. In most

of entertainment cultures, celebrity product placement is subtle, such that celebrities simply use or wear the item in public. However, in Korea, celebrities not only have to publically use or wear the product, they have to take a picture to demonstrate that what they are endorsing.

Celebrity product placement is persuasive because fans are often looking for ways to imitate the idols they like. As mentioned above, celebrities are often the perfect mirror image that people chase after. One of the ways to physically diminish the gap is through using the same product the celebrity uses. In addition, fans are known for emulating what their idols do, so they are very likely to try out a product because their favorite idol is recommending one. Thus, a celebrity who is admired by the general public can especially arouse this kind of emotion and attract more people to try the product. According to my interviewee Yvette, she became aware of different Korean brands that she never heard of before simply through celebrity product placements. Fans are always browsing through photos their idols uploaded, so when a celebrity wears/showcases/uses a new product, fans catch on to them really quickly. There are many websites that provide detailed breakdowns of each celebrity's outfit so fans can easily purchase the exact same outfit and fulfill the desire to become the idol they esteem²⁷.

Furthermore, cosmetics is something that is often closely applied on one's body, so applying a face mask that has an idol packaging or using the same perfume that a

Sponsor Flicks: Lizzy for International bnt with Miss A's Suzy and 4Minute's Hyuna
Posted on 01/08/2013 by [loveafterschool]



Image 2-10. Three female idols posing with International BNT Products

²⁷ For example, <http://style.soshified.com/> for dressing like Girl's Generations, <http://bigbangswag.com/> for BIGBANG.

celebrity is found using can provide fans a sense of intimacy. It shortens the distance between the idols and the fans. This is one of the concepts behind ETUDE HOUSE's newest perfume collection. The collection features five different perfumes that are designed by the members of a boy group called SHINee. Each of the members created the scent, the theme and the packaging of his respective perfume. Moreover, each perfume is represented as a person with characteristics – “Ms. Holic, Ms. Jealous, Ms. Bling, Ms. Sunshine and Ms. Bloom” – and they are supposed to be the member's dream girls (“coincidentally” matches with SHINee's title song at that time “Dream Girl”). Not only can fans identify with different scents/characters, they can also imagine themselves to be using the perfume that their favorite Oppa (Korean term for older brother) designed for them and in turn become their Oppa's dream girl.

(iv) Negative Impacts of Korean Beauty Culture

In *Landscape of Capital*, Robert Goldman and Stephen Papson (2011) argue that, “while advertising spectacularizes the power of commodities to enhance social relations, the real nitty-gritty of producing value is omitted, abstracted, or aestheticized” (67). Goldman and Papson are looking at more specifically corporate ads, but I believe this criticism can be applied to fashion and cosmetics ads as well. In the countless Korean ads I surveyed, “the power of commodities” is undoubtedly impressive: a watch can make a person more lovable and cute²⁸, a windbreaker can turn someone into a healthy and fearless individual who runs around the city²⁹, a pair of fake eye lashes can make someone become a celebrity³⁰ and a bottle of energy drink can turn a grumpy and tired person into an energetic and positive one³¹ etc. As Goldman and Papson (2011) state, these ads only show improvements (of social relations, of health, of appearance)

²⁸ CodeAnalysisSeason5. 4:46 – 5:15, Casio Baby-G, featuring Girls' Generation.

²⁹ *ibid.*, 11:02-12:00, Eider, featuring Yoona and Lee Min Ho.

³⁰ *ibid.*, 5:31-5:50, Secret Star Girl, featuring Girl's Day.

³¹ *ibid.*, 1:54-2:24, Vita500, featuring Suzy.

that “materialize out of thin air” (67) but omit the “amount of labor necessary” (67) to obtain the money, the looks and the status. Celebrities compound this effect because they widen the gap between reality and expectations. Ads don’t show how much time and money celebrities spend on beautifying themselves, dieting and working out so that they can look the way they do. Viewers are tricked by the ads to believe that purchasing those commodities will indeed help them become more like what they saw on television.

Not only are Korean ads misleading, but K-Pop songs omit the labor needed to become attractive as well. It is easy to find K-Pop songs that directly discuss beauty. In GOT7’s debut song “Girls Girls Girls,” they talked about how easy it is to be hot:

I don’t know why I don’t even have to try
 Just looking at me makes [girls] go crazy
 My look, my style, my swagger
 Oh, they love me even if I don’t do anything
 Just give a glance and approach casually
 “Hey girl! How you doing?”
 (Girls Girls Girls they love me)
 What’s with my body?
 (Girls Girls Girls they love me)
 Ever since birth until forever.

- “Girls Girls Girls” by GOT7

As the song illustrates, these boys have had the looks and the swag since birth and they don’t even know how they attract all the girls. It promotes a culture that encourage people to look flawless effortlessly; if one is not naturally attractive, then he/she should hide the labor put in to achieving that state. One simply won’t get the girls unless he has the “look,” “style,” and “swagger.” Girls’ Generation’s “The Boys” convey a similar message. They sang, “We’re born to win... 'Cause we get it in... 'Cause I got the magic touch... Can't deny, I know I can fly.” This kind of song promotes the idea that one won’t be able to charm others unless one is born for it. There is never any talk about *how* to get the “magic touch” or “[be] fly.” Moreover, their

looks are the main reason why they can “get it in,” not because of their personality, their talent or their behaviors.

Through consuming K-Pop and its related products, international fans slowly adopt their standard of beauty and concept of image. By looking up to Korean idols, fans view idols’ appearances and their actions as the ideal mirror image. In order to lessen the gap between the imaginary and the reality, fans begin to alter their concept of beauty and/or adopt the Korean standard of beauty. The creator of the blog kpopthin.weebly.com says that she was motivated to become thinner because of Kpop:

“I love Kpop. But it made me feel bad about myself. All those girls were so pretty. They made me feel so fat. Honestly, I’m a bit chubby. So I decided to lose some weight! I’ve lost 6 pounds so far and I’m planning to keep that up!” (kpopthin 2014)

As the writer mentions, watching the female idols in K-Pop made her “feel bad about [herself]” such that she could no longer accept the original her as pretty or fit. On her website, there are pictures of K-Pop idols showing off their slim figures and slender waists. There is no doubt that these images motivated her to keep fit, but it also made her devalue herself and lose confidence in her natural body. Since all the idols are usually underweight and their photos are almost always photoshopped, they represent a completely skewed health standard. On Kpopthin’s blog, the author shares a long list of tips on what to eat and exercises one can do daily to reduce weight. Her tone of voice is extremely positive and upbeat. There is not a sentence that mentions the difficulty of practicing those strict routines (like drinking three glasses of water whenever one feels hungry so that it fills you up, eating 90% vegetables and 10% meat etc.) Once again, the labor is concealed from the viewers’ eyes, and one can only see her glamorous results.

In addition, fans are often mesmerized by the perfection of the idols and view this as a qualification to become an idol. When I ask my interviewees to describe their favorite idols to someone who doesn't know anything about K-Pop, the first adjectives are almost always about how their looks:

Tiffany (when describing EXO): “*really* good looking, good at singing and dancing... super great at what they do and super dedicated and awesome.”

Vivian (when describing Girl's Generation): “they're really beautiful girls, they dance well, they sing well, and really talented at everything, it's ridiculous.”

Alice (EXO): “There are these twelve *very* good looking, *very very* hot Asian guys that you just start salivating when you see them. They're just multi-talented; you should check them out because they're just better than Miley Cyrus in many other ways.”

Sandy (EXO): “They're twelve guys, (oh my gosh), they market to a group of girls, and they're all handsome, talented and good at dancing of course.”

Sally (EXO): When you look at EXO, I don't understand where [SM Entertainment] can find twelve guys who are all so handsome!

Fans are not undermining the fact that their favorite idols are talented, but one simply cannot go far without both the looks *and* the talent in Korea. Fans unconsciously adopt the local Korean's expectation for K-Pop idols – perfection in their performance and perfection in their physical looks. Yet, that does not mean fans are always complacent about Korea's standard of beauty.

III. International Fan's Critique of K-Pop's Visual Culture

While international fans are mesmerized by the perfect looks of these idols, they also acknowledge that K-Pop is overly image-obsessed. Having consumed both western and Korean popular culture, international fans tend to compare K-Pop culture to Western Pop culture. Since there is something to compare it to, they are more aware of the flaws (and strengths) within K-Pop culture.

Many interviewees were concerned about Korean popular culture's "obsession over looks" (interview). As Joey described it, "Korea's obsessed with appearance, rather than who somebody really is." This causes companies to seek good-looking trainees first, and then train them up for talent, instead of the other way around. In Joey's words, it is less of "Are you talented?" than "Do you look good?" This doesn't mean that Korean society and the K-Pop communities do not appreciate people with talent, but it often takes a person with both talent and looks to make it big in the arena.

When asked if the fans think that American artists are more skilled and talented than Korean artists, many often reply "yes," because it is easier for non-talented artists to become popular in K-Pop world. However, they often follow up by clarifying that there are also very talented K-Pop artists around, it is the fixation on looks that bother them. Joey explains,

"I know it sounds bad to say this, but honestly, I [think American artists are more talented]. Because if you look at Donald Glover, aka Childish Gambino, and compare him to, let's say, one of the [members] in B.A.P. (Korean boy band), [members in B.A.P] are not bad rappers, but they're not Childish Gambino. Childish Gambino has been rapping since he was very little and rapping about things that he's passionate about. Although sometimes it's a hit or miss with him, but he gets to do what he wants to do. I am not saying the guys in B.A.P are *not* talented, but I feel like it's more manufactured... Yes, some of them are talented now, but also it is the fact that [K-Pop] is so obsessed with image rather than actual real talent. If you look at Adele and some [Western artists] who are overweight, [they would not make it big in Korea]. I really was in love with a group called "Piggy Dolls" (three members Korean girl group). They recently came back, but all the [original] members are replaced. All the members originally were really overweight but they were really talented. Although they lost a lot of weight, but they are still technically overweight in Korean standards [so] they didn't last. But they were 20 times better than the new [members] of Piggy Dolls (who are now within Korean beauty standard)³². People are pissed about it but it is because of the Korean obsession with perfection and image.

Joey is mainly bothered by the fact that the Korean entertainment industry is so obsessed over looks that one's appearance overrides his/her musical/acting talent. International fans know that

³² For more information about the girl group change, read: <http://seoulbeats.com/2013/09/piggy-girls-making-comeback-im-smiling/>

they are fascinated by K-Pop idols' flawlessness, but they believe that they are critical about the problem and want to speak up against it. They hope to see a space where K-Pop artists can be successful regardless of whether he/she fits Korea's (manufactured) standard of beauty. In that sense, these fans are imposing their Western expectations on Korean culture.

Another conversation on Youtube can demonstrate the sentiment from fans:

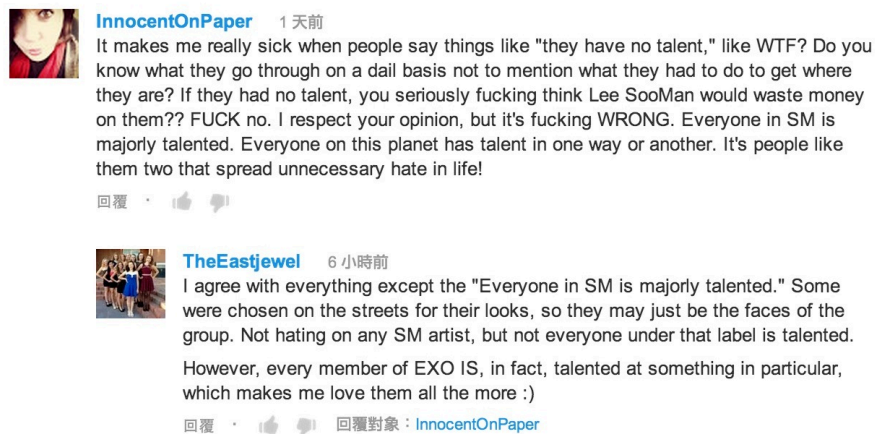


Image 2-11. Fans debate over if SM artists are all talented (source: Youtube.com)

Just as netizen

“TheEastjewel” says, she

believes that there are

Korean artists who are

simply chosen to be idols

because of their looks. In

the previous chapter, I

mentioned that a common

“role” inside a group is being the “visual”. In that sense, domestic K-Pop fans consider being absolutely stunning a type of talent. However, international fans seem to have a harder time grasping that idea. In the Western entertainment world where most artists are individual artists (as opposed to groups) and are often discovered due to being talented at a certain discipline, be it singing, dancing, rapping etc., international fans are more familiar with the idea that talent should come to define an artist; being (naturally) good looking is a bonus. Undoubtedly, this mindset is different from that found in Korea, where talent and beauty should come hand in hand before one is considered to be an artist. Not only is what is being produced by the artists considered art, but the artist physically should be considered as art also. Besides, Western artists are expected to produce their own unique genre of music, whereas that is not the case in

Korea. International fans realize that it is harder to pinpoint the uniqueness of each K-Pop group (or their works), especially when many artists look very similar (especially due to plastic surgery).

Moreover, international fans describe themselves as more “understanding” than local fans because they “care about the [artists] more as people not celebrities.” I asked my interviewees if their perceptions of their idols changed when they got into a scandal. Valerie explains, “everyone expect [the idols] to be very polite, but then I feel bad because who can be always polite all the time? ... [The idols] are people too.” Another interviewee Brittany laments that K-Pop culture is too restricting since K-Pop idols are not supposed to have their own personal lives. In summary, while international fans view the flawless appearance as an asset of K-Pop idols, many of them are concerned about the beauty standard in Korea.

IV. Understanding South Korea’s Obsession with Beauty throughout History

What makes Koreans focus so much energy and time on their looks and their bodies? This question has bothered me ever since I started becoming a fan of K-Pop. I simply do not understand how Korean culture can be so traditional and yet so artificial at the same time.

Part of the answer lies in the history of Korea. Korea underwent successive traumatic events in the past century. Following 35 years of Japanese colonization, Korea’s short-lived independence was quickly ended by U.S. occupation, the division of the peninsula and the devastating Korean War. Since then, the United States army’s installations in Korea have ensured U.S. dominance in the country. While Korea began to modernize and recuperate from war rapidly, it never had a time to decolonize. In 1997, the nation underwent an International Monetary Fund crisis during which Korea’s economy hit bottom once again. With many years of hard work and sacrifices, South Korea managed to restart and become a prominent country in

the world today. Looking back, Koreans were constantly caught in between political and economic turmoil and the citizens were unable to properly reflect and digest on their traumatic past. More importantly, these historical events shaped Koreans into community-oriented, highly united and nationalistic citizens. It is as if Koreans need to demonstrate to the world how strong they are in order to compensate for the feeling of inferiority and disrespect they accumulated in the past century.

Coming out of Japanese colonization, Korea, as a nation, experienced its identity crisis in the 1940s. The country wanted to seek a new Korean identity, nationally and culturally, that was different from Japan's. Contemporaneously, western modernity appeared as an "alternative regime of value" (Yoo 2007:424), meaning a framework of society that was different from the Japanese colonial regime. Seeing that Western modernity had been neglected during Japanese Occupation, South Korea inscribed Americanism onto their new society. This option was especially desirable because unlike the Japanese colonizers from whom Koreans are not fully discernible, Americans are. So by becoming modern and Westernized faster, Koreans tried to fulfill an "imagined comparative advantage" (Yoo 2007:425) so as to feel that they had beaten their previous colonizer.

While there are many ways to demonstrate one's modernity, the body became an easily accessible site to showcase that identity. In order to close the gap between South Korea's powerless and backwards identity at the time and the idealized modern and victorious identity of Japan, Koreans took on Americanism as the "ideal-ego." Thus, Korean society fetishized Western culture by assigning it value – it becomes the symbol of sophistication, self-control and success. One of the fastest ways to relieve that lack is through modifying one's body. By looking and dressing more like an American, the person comes to physically embody the

imaginary self within the mirror and become the “ideal ego”. This is because one who looks more modernized and westernized is no longer just a colonized being, but someone who is similar and on par with the colonizers. The act “[transforms] the inferiority feeling of the colonized into a feeling of ontological stability in transition” (Yoo 2007:425). Therefore, Americanized beauty became the trendy concept of beauty and bodily style in Korea (Yoo 2007:431). In fact, Koreans began to look at Hollywood movies and other types of media for inspiration. The Western body-type (tall and sporty) and facial features (tall nose, double eyelid, long lashes etc.) became the new ideal (Yoo 2007:431).

In addition, Americans’ presence during and after the Korean War led Koreans to view their bodies, their physical features, as defective and flawed. David Palumbo-Liu clarifies that double-eyelid surgery, the most popular surgery in Korea, flourished in Asia after World War II. More surprisingly, surgery programs “began as a public relations program of United States occupational forces in Korea” (Palumbo-Liu 95). The government argued that plastic surgery would be physical evidence of “America’s goodwill in Asia” (Palumbo-Liu 95). Dr. Ralph Millard, a military surgeon sent to Korea on a good will mission to reconstruct war-damaged bodies, became obsessed with transforming his patients so that they were more readable for Americans. Millard justified his actions by explaining that “because of the squint in [a Korean’s] slant eyes, Americans could not tell what he was thinking and consequently did not trust him” (Palumbo-Liu, 100). He became the first white person to create a double-eyelid surgery for the Asian face. He subsequently embarked on a journey of “de-orientalizing” Koreans in the name of making the men look more trustworthy and the women closer to America’s standard of beauty (Palumbo-Liu, 101).

It is during this time when bodies became “an exhibition space for modernity’s ready-made products” (Yoo 2007:425) in Korea. Millard’s actions brought grave consequences within the country. Koreans became convinced that their slanted, single-lidded eyes were in fact a defect inherent in an Asian’s face. Moreover, this defect had to be fixed in order to have any worthwhile and trusted contact with the West. Yoo (2007) argues,

“body transformation... is another outlet for denouncing one’s own indeterminate body. At the same time, such mimicry of the other can only be schizophrenic because it always ends up being a partial and incomplete representation of the other, only to remind oneself of what is not of him” (436).

Yoo points out that Koreans were altering themselves as a way of rejecting their old selves. However, the move is contradictory because Koreans will never be able to become real Americans. They will be constantly reminded of how Koreans are imperfect and missing something simply by going through the process. Similar to how Lacan describes a child’s development as the ceaseless “[hope] to fill the lack” (Groz 1990:35), Koreans will not stop chasing after the ideal body unless they accept that they are different from the fantasized, American image.

As an international fan, I find Korea’s unstoppable infatuation with looks frustrating and upsetting. Since they only focus on the dissatisfactory parts of themselves, Koreans fail to recognize the unique culture and identity they present to the world. It is unfortunate that Korea’s history of cosmetic surgery has perpetuated the idea that Koreans are physically inferior. While I am not arguing that Koreans today receive surgery because they want to feel superior to Caucasians, I do believe the historic trauma from colonization has contributed to why Koreans focus so heavily on their looks.

In conclusion, fans might believe that Korean popular culture is glamorous and sensational because of their focus on perfection. However, they fail to see that the result is

reflective of the painful events that Korea experienced in the last century. Korea's constant emphasis on one's looks is an attempt to satisfy the eternal gap between the country's real self and its idealized identity.

Chapter 3

Chastity, Nationalism and the Slutty Move: The Story of Being an Innocent or Sexy Woman Told through K-Pop

대체 왜 그땐 날 거들떠 보지 않고
 Why on Earth didn't you notice me back then
 매일 날 그대만 바라보게 만들고
 Everyday, you made me gaze only at you
 오늘은 좀더 예쁘게 나 나 나 날 (오늘도)
 Today, show me me me me a little more prettily (today too)
 보여줘 너무 멋진 너 너 너 너 너에게
 To very cool you you you you
 거울아 거울아 이 세상에 누가 제일 예쁘니?
 Hey Mirror, hey Mirror, who is the prettiest in the world?
 거울아 거울아 이 세상에 내가 제일 예쁘니?
 Hey Mirror, hey Mirror, am I the prettiest in the world?
 오늘만은 내가 제일 예쁘다고 말해줘 봐
 Just for today, please try saying I'm the prettiest
 너를 생각하면 더 거울에 비친 내 모습은 마치
 It's as if my reflection becomes prettier the more I think of you
 너무 예쁜데 너는 자꾸 왜 다른 생각만 하는지
 Why do you frequently think differently?
 왜 날 보지 않는건데
 Why do you not look at me?

- 4Minute “거울아 거울아” (Mirror, Mirror)

Women in Korea are constantly battling against dichotomies of their identities – being innocent and obedient, being sexy and eager, being confident and defiant. The song quoted above illustrates a frequently seen representation of Korean women: the song talks about a woman who is longing for a man's attention. She wants the man to notice her, look at her, think of her, and show his “cool” side to her. She also seems to be overly attached to this man since she “becomes prettier” by merely thinking of the man. In a sense, her entire existence revolves around the guy that she is deeply in love with. In the following section, I will use Laura Mulvey's theory of male gaze and Jacques Lacan's theory of mirror stage to analyze the song.

The music video of “Mirror Mirror” starts with a scene that invites the viewers to spectate the 4Minute girls singing. The setting looks like a make-up table at a backstage area. One can see a square mirror surrounded by light bulbs. Soon, the mirror cracks due to a mysterious force, and the audience is transported through the glass to the stage where the five singers are standing with their backs towards the audience. This setting parallels Mulvey’s description of the cinema. Both exemplifies the “illusion of looking into a private world” – it is as if the audience is magically brought into this hidden world within the mirror. This makes the 4Minute girls as objects being looked at. In addition, the concept of mirror is extremely fitting to Mulvey’s theory. The mirror is the epitome of narcissism. People use the mirror to look at their reflections. Is the music video hinting that what the audience is seeing reflects the reality they are living in? Do the music video and the lyrics express what the audience wants? More importantly, do the audience identify with the main character in the song?

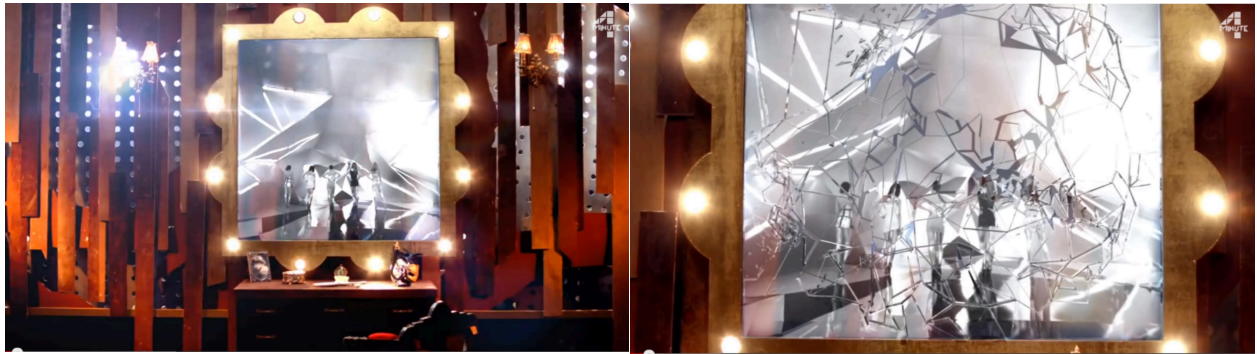


Image 3-12 and Image 3-13. Opening scene of 4Minute’s “Mirror Mirror” Music video

Undoubtedly, mirror is the key object in this song. In fact, there are two ways of understanding the lyrics of the song. Instead of taking the lyrics as words addressed to a man, imagine the whole conversation to be between the girl and her mirror. Instead of trying to catch a man’s attention, she is asking the mirror why it didn’t notice her before, in the sense that mirror had never shown a pretty face of hers. She is begging the mirror (literally) to show the prettiest reflection of her. As Lacan suggests, human establishes their ego through a mirror –

one realizes who he/she is through looking at his/her own reflection from the mirror (Grosz 1990:31). Moreover, people derive pleasure from viewing their most perfect image. When the speaker asks the mirror if she is pretty, she is not asking out of curiosity. Instead, she is asking because she wants a confirmation; she wants someone/something, at least the mirror, to affirm that she is the prettiest, especially since the man she loves does not acknowledge her beauty. Thus, the act of asking the mirror is the woman's search for her ego, her worth and her identity. Unfortunately, how she measures her worth is nothing else but beauty. In the song, she only asks the mirror "am I the prettiest" and begs the mirror "[to say] I'm the prettiest." She did not ask "who is the most confident," "who is the kindest," "who is the most hardworking," "who is the smartest" etc. In other words, this song promotes the idea that self-worth is evaluated upon beauty. But then, whose standard of beauty?

Within the song, there are two types of gaze – one from the supposedly male character whom the female is addressing, one from the female character who is looking at herself. Throughout the song, the female is constantly searching for the male gaze; she is promoting and normalizing the female's "to-be-looked-at-ness." The lyrics "it is as if my reflection gets prettier the more I think of you" conform the idea that women are the erotic icons that men gaze at. Since men have the power to change women's minds and their concepts of beauty, women are simply there to embody the ideals men established, she is not defining her own.

As Mulvey suggests, women take on a trans-sex identification so that they can identify with the male gaze and imagine to be active. Similarly, the woman in "Mirror Mirror" undergoes this oscillation. In the beginning of the song, she questions the mirror and the man for their reasons to ignore her. As the song progress, she sings, "tell me that I appealed to you from the beginning." The firm statement creates a stark contrast to the insecure questions she

asked before. Eventually, the girl sings, “Oh mirror shine, let me fix my makeup... Mirror, mirror, who is the most beautiful in the world? It’s me.” In the whole song, the speaker only states that she is “the most beautiful in the world” once. Within the 3 minutes and 42 seconds of singing, the protagonist transforms from a “bearer of meaning” to someone who acts (fixes her makeup) and a “maker of meaning” (declares to be the most beautiful). The transformation can be explained by the woman’s trans-sex identification. She oscillates from the



Image 3-14. 4Minute's "wide leg spread dance" in "Mirror Mirror"

female’s ego into the male’s ego and thus identified with the male gaze. She realizes that she needs not to rely on another man (or the mirror) to be prettier, since she is capable of making the changes herself. In the end of the song, she asserts, “Let’s make it up³³, so I can make your heart flutter when you look at me³⁴.” In addition, the choreography also supports this point. When singing “ My mirror, mirror mirror,” the girls do the infamous “wide leg spread dance” where they get on the floor on their knees and repeatedly spread their legs apart (see image 3-3). It is an undoubtedly sexy and suggestive move. The temporary acceptance of masculinization is so powerful that the woman become confident of her sexiness and uses it seduce the man directly. At the same time, one must not forget that all these are perceived through the male gaze, and the power is equipped by taking on the male persona. The female is inevitably critiquing herself through the men’s standard of beauty. At the end of the music video, the scene zooms back out of the mirror in the make-up table. Yet, the mirror is no longer broken, and the

³³ This line is sung in English. However, based on the context, there is a huge possibility where they are trying to say “let’s put on make up.” I believe that it is a badly written English line.

³⁴ In Korean: 나를 보면 니 마음 흔들릴 수 있게

audience is transported back to the outside world, just like how the music video started. While this can be an artistic choice to echo the beginning of the video, it also acts as a symbol: everything has ended and returned back to normal. The female has ended her temporary masculinization and she is back to her original, powerless self. The empowering moment of change is nowhere to be seen.

“Mirror Mirror” demonstrates how both men and women are guilty of continuing this fetishism. Men do so by ignoring women who do not fit the standard of beauty, exactly what happened to the character in the song. In addition, the female speaker is constantly defining herself through the male gaze. Although she asks the mirror to be the judge, the mirror’s opinion and the girl’s opinion of herself are inevitably the same: that of the man and the society. If the girl were to be satisfied with her appearance, she would not have asked the mirror if she was pretty on the first place. Throughout the song, the girl is seeking for man’s approval of her. Only as she regress to the memories her active masculine phase, she begins to takes action and defines her own sense of beauty.

In fact, there are real life examples of how women promote “fetishistic scopophilia” within Korea. In a recent television talk show, the host asks girls group SISTAR member Hyorin whether she would rather be called “pretty” or “sexy.” Hyorin, who is known for being sexy, unexpectedly responded: “I'd rather be called pretty. After living life, I've come to realize that being pretty is everything. You don't need to be cute or sexy... to a woman, being pretty is what makes you considered nice” (NetizenBuzz 2013b).

Her answer reflects that being “pretty,” “sexy,” or “cute” are pretty much the only three options available for women in Korea. Hyorin’s statement is supported by a lot of Korean

netizens. The comments with the most (601+, 22-) up votes³⁵ says, “She's right... A woman is blessed if she's pretty.” The second most up-voted comment (456+, 17-) writes, “She's realized reality quite directly. She's not wrong.” While it is impossible to tell if men or women write these comments, it is apparent that a large number of people supported the notion. In fact, another popular comment (188+, 9-) says, “To a person, looks are an absolute worth. Handsome people are the minority in the world and anyone who's been to a job interview will know just how important good looks are... Hyorin's definitely right.” It is simply disheartening to be living in a society where beauty, not ability, personality or virtue, determines one's success. How restrictive would that be? And I believe this pressure is not only on women nowadays. Men are also becoming more and more concern over their looks.

I. Korea's Obsession with Chastity

Within Korean advertising (especially television commercials), there are very limited forms of female representations. During my stay in Korea, I noticed that a core group of celebrities dominate the commercials. It is common to see a certain idol appears in multiple different commercials within the same commercial break, showing companies prefer idols with a certain image to promote their products. The most popular celebrities in the summer of 2013 includes Suzy (from Miss A), Park Shin Hye (actress) Yoona, Seohyun (both from Girls' Generation), and Krystal (from F(x)).

Suzy, who is 19, has been the CF (commercial films) queen in South Korea. She took over her best friend IU (solo singer, 22) after IU's scandal with a boy band member. In 2012 alone, she filmed 15 different CFs (Allkpop 2013d); in 2013, she was ranked as the most preferred CF model for 5 months straight (Allkpop 2013c). According to the survey from

³⁵ In Korean media portal websites, there is a choice of “up-voting” or “down-voting” other people's comment on a news article. Up vote (I will use + as the symbol) denotes an agreement with the comment, down vote (-) means disagreement.

CM Strategic Research Institute, Suzy is "receiving love across age groups from teenagers to people in their sixties." She has endorsed a wide range of products, from food to cosmetics to electronics and fashion. Similarly, Yoona, 23, is a very popular face in the commercial world, filming 14 CFs in 2012.

What do they have in common? Without a doubt, these girls are all extremely young. Second, they all have a "clean," "innocent," "pure" image in Korea. Suzy, Yoona, and IU back in 2012 are considered the "nation's younger sister" (국민 여동생) and "nation's first love" (국민 첫사랑) - titles that carry much weight and high expectations. In order to uphold such titles, one is expected to be scandal-free: no scandals with men (they should not be photographed overly attached to any men), no rude or indecent behaviors, no sexy image, always polite and friendly, and a clean record at all times. These values are also reflected in the advertisements.

In the following ad, Suzy is dressed up as student to promote a cosmetic product. She is



Image 3-15. Suzy features in school uniform (source: Kpopgirlsindia)

dressed in high school uniform attire, holding a bottle. In the background, one can see her lining up with two other high school students at the bus stop, ready to get onboard the TN brand school bus. The slogan of the ad is “there is a beautiful surprise in nature.”³⁶ Overall, the theme of the ad revolves around freshness, naturalness and purity through the use of green color. In advertising, it is common to use color(s) to direct the viewer’s attention on the ad. With the

³⁶ To translate it literally: “It is in our nature that there is a beautiful surprise.” The sentence form accentuate the location “our nature” by putting the topic marker “는” after it.

slogan in green, green grass, the green bus stop sign, a green pattern on the cosmetic bottle and the green school uniform, the viewers link the idea of nature (grass and the trees) with the product, along with Suzy's (or students') purity with the product. Suzy is also associated with the idea of nature/being natural. While the slogan is referring to the cosmetic product as the "beautiful surprise," it is also referring to Suzy who is known for her natural beauty (without plastic surgery) in Korea.

The following two photos are from the cosmetic store ETUDE HOUSE's Sweet Recipe Collection in 2013. The concept of the series revolves around creating make-up products that look like desserts and candies. The names and packaging of the products echo that idea. Sulli (the girl on the right) is trying to taste the "Baby Choux Base," named after the choux pastry because of the supposedly light texture the base cream leaves on the skin. One can see that the samples of the base are purposefully made into the shape of a meringue. In addition, both Krystal and Sulli are dressed in very girly outfits with silly hairstyles to imitate children. Their actions – biting one's pinkie and having "food" stuck on one's nose – are typical amongst

young children. The poster focuses on the child-like and cutesy aspect; it leaves the viewer feeling that these girls are very clueless or powerless, unable to take care of themselves properly.

Lee Yeon Hee, an actress who was deemed as nation's first love in 2006 after starring in movie "A Millionaire's First Love." She



Image 3-16. Krystal and Sulli in girly outfits and poses

commented on her feelings regarding the title:

“I actually feel happy about the pressure being taken off of me and I'm glad that the title has passed on to Suzy. Of course, being loved by the public is a good thing but I can't be expected to show a good image at all times. I also can't be the nation's first love for the rest of my life.”

As Lee points out, there is nothing truly glorious that comes with the title. Instead, being a nation's first love means she is imagined to be everyone's first love. She is objectified in every possible way to be the most ideal girl to date for the first time; the first time holding hands, the first kiss etc. are reserved for everyone's imagination. Breaking that perfect image equals to breaking the audiences' fantasies.

The more important question here is “why,” why do Koreans emphasis on an innocent and pure image so heavily? One of the possible factors might be hidden in the tragic historic past of South Korea. “Comfort women³⁷” (*hwanghyang nyō*³⁸) denotes the women who were sent out of their country and victimized by foreign dominations (mostly soldiers). In “National and Construction of Gender in Korea,” Chungmoo Choi (1998) explains that comfort women were first sent to “Qing China in the mid-seventeenth century as tribute items for Qing's suzerainty over Korea” (13). These women were usually from the lower class and they were sent back from China after they are no longer deemed young, appealing or valuable. Having been consumed by the foreigners, these comfort women were “stigmatized as defiled women and labeled promiscuous” (Choi 1998:13). But that was only the beginning. During the Japanese invasion in 1900s, large numbers of women, ranging from 12 to 20s in age, were “forced, kidnapped, lured, deceived, or sold to service the sexual needs of Japanese military in their occupied regions” (Ahn 2000). Since the beginning of 1930s, “Comfort stations” were set

³⁷ “Comfort woman” (慰安婦) is the English translation of the original Japanese term. But it is called differently within Korea.

³⁸ 환향녀 - It is term derived from Chinese characters (還鄉女). It literally means “woman who returns home”

up to service soldiers. Japanese soldiers referred to them as “*nigyuchi*” (29 to 1), as a reference to the ration between number of men one comfort woman is supposed to serve each day. Since there is little documentation on the matter, the estimated total (including women from all countries, like China, Philippines and more) usually lies between 80,000 and 200,000. Having said that, Korean women made up to 80 to 90 percent of the total number. In addition to the pain left behind from World War II, the US military occupation also played a role in the booming Korean prostitution and comfort women industry. According to Katrina Maynes (2012), “It is estimated that at least 250,000 women became military prostitutes, while thousands more served as bartenders, dancers, and call girls” (11). Although the demand was high, one should note that the reputation of these pleasure women was not good. American military officers believed that “Asia was laden with infectious and venereal diseases.” Thus, the military set up a law that prohibited American soldiers from consorting with prostitutes; those who violated the rule would be fined for \$1000 and one year of imprisonment. However, that did not slow down the men’s scorching needs. In the end, the military had to establish the Venereal Disease Control Council in order to monitor the health situation of soldiers and promote prevention methods.

Looking at Korea’s colonial past, it is not hard to understand why chastity is valued so highly. Comfort women, even though they did not actively choose to be promiscuous, are the living reminders of the shame and the weakness of the country. In Choi’s words, “comfort woman” signifies “a nomenclature that constructs Korean men as the victims of emasculation of the Korean nation” (Choi 1998:13). Thus, upper-class women were often reminded to bring a small dagger in their daily attire, so that they could take their own lives if they were ever violated by men other than their own husband. In this case, chastity within Korea is not a

preference or a liking, it is a symbol of nationalism and pride. For a woman to be chaste, she is untouched by any men, especially men from other countries. A chaste woman represents a strong Korea that is undefeated and unharmed by others. It is a Korea where Korean men have power and control over their own Korean women. It is through the chastity of a woman where Korea (and Korean men) can redeem their anti-colonial nationalism and reclaim their masculinity.

II. Androcentric Nationalism

While looking at Korea's history makes their obsession with a pure image more justifiable, it does not make it less problematic. In fact, women are confined to being a virgin and that serves as a great barrier against the women's movement within Korea. In Seungwook Moon's "Begetting the Nation," she summarizes the argument:

"It is valid to focus on the women's movement in contemporary Korea as indirect resistance to official nationalism, which constructs the nation as the community of men and defended by men, in which women exists merely as precondition. Androcentric discourse tinted with militarism delegitimizes women as citizens who are excluded from soldiering, constructing them as carriers of nationalist wombs to deliver heirs and potential warriors who can defend the nation" (Moon, 1998:52).

As Moon suggests, the whole event regarding comfort women was seen from and acted upon a male's point of view – echoing Mulvey's "male gaze." Women were simply seen as victims, the bearer of national pride, not as an agent or a force of change. Under the androcentric mindset, men are the only ones who could take action and protect the nation and its people. In the following paragraphs, I will demonstrate that the focus on chastity secures Korean women's role of being the "precondition," which further supports the concept of a male nation.

South Korean culture has been deeply influenced and shaped by "the Tan'gun myth, the history of foreign invasion and patriotic defense, the Tan'gun spirit, Confucianism and Buddhism" (Moon 1998:52). The Tan'gun myth refers to the widely accepted explanation of the

origin of the Korean nation. Tan'gun wang'gōm is the founder of the Korean nation and the mythological first king of Korea in 2333 B.C. Tan'gun's father is Hwangnung, an illegitimate son of the heavenly lord Hwanin; his mother is Wungnyō (literally means “bear woman”), a bear-turned-human female who endured 100 days of eating only mugworms and garlic inside a cave to transform into human (Encyclopedia Britannica). In many ways, this myth represents the gender hierarchy in Korea – the man comes from heaven, the female is originally a wild beast. Wungnyō's suffering “carries the deep social meaning of womanhood epitomized by patience to endure suffering and ordeal” (Moon 1998:41). Moon (1998) points out that the depiction of gender in this myth suggests that “woman's only contribution to the creation of the Korean nation was the provision of a proto-nationalist womb” (41). It seems like Wungnyō existed only because she is the precondition needed for Tan'gun to be born. Women play no role in the construction of the nation other than procreating more men, which feeds into the Confucian principle of patrilineage. If women's only use is to procreate, chastity is extremely important in a sense that it symbolizes she has not been contaminated by other men before and has the potential to give birth to the men of this country.

Moon (1998) argues that the myth implies that the “Korean nation is ultimately the community of men” (41). While one may claim that South Korea is progressive enough to elect a female president, other indexes within Korea reflect less equality. According to the Korean Herald, South Korea ranks 111th place out of 136 countries on the “gender gap index³⁹,” which is based on women's economic participation, level of education, health and political activity within each country (The Korea Herald 2013). *The Economist* (2013) compiled its own “glass-ceiling index,” looking at where on earth women can have “the best chance of equal treatment at

³⁹ For actual “Global Gender Gap Report” by World Economic Forum, see http://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GenderGap_Report_2013.pdf#page=20

work.” The index is based on five factors: the number of men and women respectively with tertiary education; female labor-force participation; the male-female wage gap; the proportion of women in senior jobs; and net child-care costs relative to the average wage. Out of the 26 countries they collected data from, South Korea ranks last with less than 15% of equality rate. The 2013 World Bank Index reveals that South Korean women have minimal economic participation and opportunity within Korea (ranked 118 out of 136). According to data in 2012 from The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, only 53.5% of the total female population in South Korea aged between 15 and 64 had a job (Kong 2013), placing Korea as the seventh lowest female employment rate among OECD countries. Although women accounts for over half or more of the total new employees within the financial industry, there was only one woman occupying the 193 a senior management positions at domestic commercial banks as of February 2013 (Kong 2013).

In addition, the military’s history and on going power further solidifies the concept of Korea as a nation made by men and defended by men. Mentioned in previous chapters, South Korea has undergone multiple wars and foreign invasions throughout history. Due to the ongoing tension between North and South Korea since 1948, South Korea has maintained a 2-years mandatory military service for male citizens between 18 and 35 (The Star Online 2012). Only men who have won Olympic medals and those with physical disability or illness⁴⁰ can be exempt from service. This totals 687,000 soldiers, the sixth largest military in the world. Most of the soldiers are positioned at the DMZ. Although most people dread the experience, most Korean men takes it as “a rite of passage” (Han 2012) – a symbolic moment when a boy turns

⁴⁰ Supreme Court, 2004Do2965, July 15, 2004 (S. Kor.) (“The current Military Service Act provides exemptions for illness, physical disability, and a system of special exceptions exist for public service workers, professional researchers, industrial technical experts while not accommodations are made for those who refuse active duty due to conscientious or religious reasons.”).

into a man. Korean men take pride in having served in the army and view it as a benchmark of being a real man⁴¹. As forty year old Chang Myong-ki told CBS, “In South Korea, you are not a man until you finish your military duty” (Cosgrove-Matherap 2003). While women are allowed to enroll in the Reserve Officer Training Corps, there are about 6400 female officers, making up less than 10% of the military. Thus, Korea is largely protected by men. As Moon explains, “the continuous necessity to defend the Korean nation masculinizes it by linking citizenship to soldiering... some Koreans are more legitimate than others; men, especially able-bodied young ones who can be warriors, are more legitimate than women” (43-44). Because of the continuous wars across the centuries, physically defending the country became a necessity; yet this is a necessity that can only be fulfilled by men. Thus, men become the decision makers, the action doers, the meaning makers, and ultimately, the victor and conqueror. Women’s role is once again shafted to become the bearer of meaning; they are the vessel through which new blood (especially men) can be born so that nationalism can be continued. Chastity (or protecting Korean women from foreigners), as the symbol of victory against other countries, normalized into the mechanism through which men continue this androcentric nationalism.

III. Bringing Sexy Back

Although chastity is still extremely important within Korean culture, new trends within the K-Pop scene suggest that the society might be heading in a new direction. In the past years, I have witnessed a lot more K-Pop music and works that address the idea of sex/sexiness and female independence. Back in the late-2000s when K-Pop began to go global, most girl groups’ concepts revolved around the cute and innocent – Wonder Girls’ “Tell Me” and “So Hot”,

⁴¹ Male celebrities used to be able to serve in the “Celebrity soldier unit,” where they perform their various skills (singing, acting, comedy etc.) to entertain fellow soldiers. Often times, men will despise celebrities who served in such units, saying that they are not real men because they did not serve in the regular units. For more information on this, see <http://www.cnn.com/2013/07/23/world/asia/south-korean-celeb-soldiers/>.

Girl's Generation's "Into the New World" and "Gee", KARA's "Pretty Girl" and "Honey" and more. Members wore colorful (Gee), cutesy (Pretty Girl) and angelic (Honey) outfits that have minimal skin exposure. The lyrics of these songs revolve around how to be a confident and beautiful girl or innocent love experience.

In 2013, there were an increasing number of female idols singing songs about "female empowerment". Just to name a few, Miss A's "I Don't Need a Man," Ailee's "I'll Show You," CL's "The Baddest Female," Lee Hyori's "Miss Korea" and Girl's Day's "Female President." All of these songs somehow encourage women to rebel and have autonomy over their lives, especially when it comes to love and work.

Miss A's song "I Don't Need A Man" (나는 남자 없이 잘 살아) opens with "This is for all the independent ladies." It has empowering lyrics that depict what a confident, strong modern lady should be like, which is quite different from most songs we have heard in Kpop before.

내 돈으로 방세 다 내
먹고 싶은 거 사 먹고 옷도 사 입고
충분하진 않지만 만족할 줄 알아
그래서 난 나를 사랑해 (hey)
부모님의 용돈 내 돈처럼

I pay my rent with my money
I buy my own food, I buy my own clothes.
It may not be enough but I know how to be satisfied.
That is why I love myself.
I don't want to spend my parent's allowance as my own
(Kromanized 2012)

The lyrics are also directed to men, telling them "being cocky won't work with me... I want to take care of myself" and clearly warn them against showering her with gifts. In the music video,



Image 3-18. Miss A members cross-dress as men in the MV (Sources: missA 2012)



Image 3-17. Choreography featuring more manly actions (Sources: missA 2012)

the four members cross-dress as men in suits (image 3-6), and reenact the scenes depicted in the lyrics. The dance choreography features motions like emphasizing the biceps (image 3-7) and saying “no” to guys. Nonetheless, according to my local Korean friends, the reception of this song was unexpected bad⁴² within Korea, but embraced by the international fans.

Having said that, there are also songs that use “female empowerment” as a cover-up to increase female support, but in fact it promote sexiness. Girl’s Day’s latest single “Female President” (여자대통령) appears to celebrate Korea’s electing of female president Park Geun Hye. However, the president is mentioned in the following context:

“Go to him first
And tell him you love him
You can do it now,
You start first.
Our country’s president is now a female,
So what’s the big deal?
Why can’t girls do it first?
Will we get arrested if we go first, the guy first?
Go to him first
And you kiss him first
You can do it now,
You start first?” (Kromanized 2013b)

Ironically, the president is used to justify that females can now be more straightforward and bold in the pursuit of a boyfriend. When one takes a careful look at the lyrics, the whole song ends up going back to same topic that most girl groups sing about: how women should behave in relations to men’s expectations, not about how women should define themselves. Besides, the music video exercises female empowerment through a disputable way. Right from the start, the members are featured erotically taking off their clothes behind a screen (image 3-8)! Many will

⁴² Compare to other Miss A album sales within Korea, “Bad But Good” sold 17,770 copies, “Touch” sold 21,613 copies but “Independent Women Part III” only sold 13,153 copies.

argue that feminism consists of female expressing their bodies the way they want⁴³, but it is dangerous and problematic when female artists correlates women's ability to take charge of the country to taking charge of one's love life. I find that comparison as belittling the achievement of women who are leaders at work and all professional arenas, especially the Korean president's. In addition, members wore minimal clothes (nude color one piece that barely covers

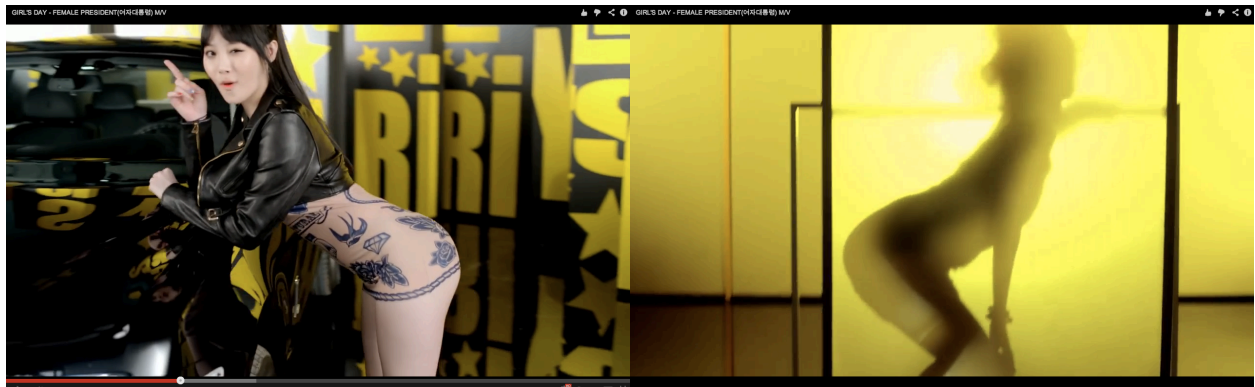


Image 3-19. Music video features very sexy outfits (Sources: Official Girl's Day Youtube 2013)

Image 3-20. Opening scene of members taking off their clothes (Sources: Official Girl's Day Youtube 2013)

their bottoms) and danced sluttily within the MV (image 3-9). While it correlates with the idea of being sexually assertive, it has nothing to do with encouraging female to be leaders of the country, when diligence and intelligence play a much larger role. Korean netizens were concerned as well. One said, "'Female President' is trash. Does anyone really think they're going to win #1 by flashing their panties? Girl's Day and Dal Shabet are so cheap," (NetizenBuzz 2013a) and another questions "I don't get how you can have a title like 'Female President' and dance around practically naked..." (NetizenBuzz 2013a). There are also Korean news articles like "Can you stop stripping? Girl's Day 'panty fashion'...is exposing your job?" (Daum 연예 2013) that directly criticizes their overly sexual outfits.

⁴³ I am aware of pro-sex arguments including the critique of sex negativity in most societies where sex and eroticism is considered as dangerous and destructive. By no means am I saying that sex should be banned from K-Pop but there are more powerful ways to display sexual freedoms other than portraying themselves as sexual objects.

At the same time, Kpop is becoming more open about sex, even to the point of blatantly objectifying female idols. The latest hit from Dal Shabet's "Be Ambitious" (내 다리를 봐) created drama because of its overly-sexualized "Monroe⁴⁴" dance. Members wear a dress/short that they can undo the dress portion during the dance, calling attention to their crotch and legs (image 3-10 and 3-11). The agency eventually decided to stop doing this routine due to music show viewers' complaints of it being too obscene (Naver 뉴스 2013a). Besides, the lyrics also reduce women to only their legs. It is basically calling upon a man to have intercourse with the girl:

"Oh I really can't wait anymore
I don't wanna just wait anymore
Look at my legs, they're pretty,
I wore a short skirt
Look as if you're interested....
Not my eyes
but look at my legs,
let go of my hand and hug me
Stop worrying, stop saving it." (Kromanized 2013a)

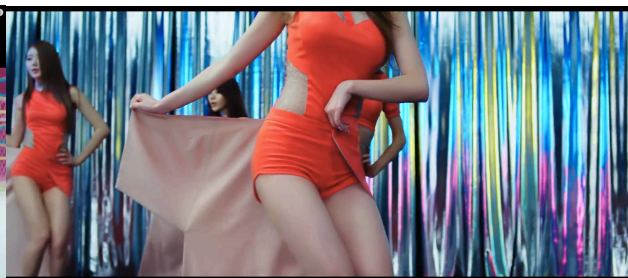
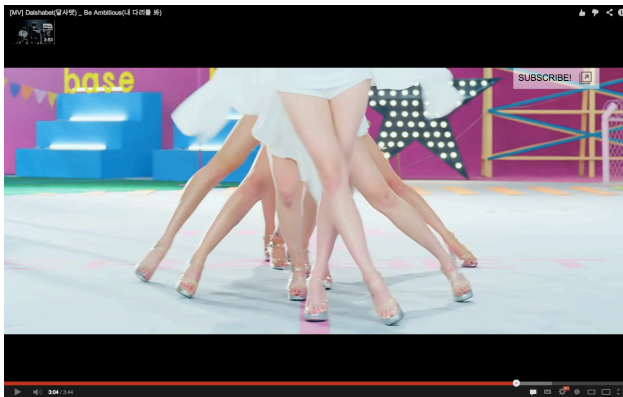


Image 3-21 and Image 3-22. "Monroe" dance choreography that focuses on leg (Sources: 1theK 2013)

In fact, there were people in Korea voicing concern on the lyrics and music video and asking for the song to be banned from distribution. Netizen "whatever101" agrees,

⁴⁴ They got their inspiration from Marilyn Monroe's famous scene from the movie "The Seven Year Itch" when her skirt is blown upward by the wind.

“From an international fan who doesn't speak or read Korean standpoint its easy to ignore the lyrics, but when you have a group like Dal Shabet performing a song with these lyrics in front of bunch of pre-teen 12 year olds (since K high schoolers are too busy with school to have anytime to watch TV), I don't really blame anyone for wanting this song to be banned.” (Allkpop 2013b)

This song is the perfect but horrid example of objectifying female bodies – reducing them into simply legs and sexual object.



Image 3-23. Featuring (clockwise) AOA's "Miniskirt" (짧은 치마), Rainbow Blaxx's "Cha Cha," Dal Shabet's B.B.B, Girl's Day's "Something" (Source: AllKPop)

In 2014, the topic of the K-Pop industry being overly-sexualized resurfaced again because four girl groups returned with highly sexual concepts in January. AOA, which debuted with a female rock band concept, surprised everyone with

“Miniskirt”, where members are shown unzipping the zipper on their

skirt to show a garter-looking part of their stockings. They also have a move where each girl places her hands on another girl's buttock, while they are all shaking their butts. Although Rainbow Blaxx is a subunit that was established with the sexy concept in mind, they intensified the eroticization in “Cha Cha” with a human X-ray scene where they “scan” and zoom-in on each member's body from head to toe while they lie amongst a table full of dessert (because they are so inviting that you want to devour them). The excessive scenes of members feeding each other, licking whipped cream off their fingers, sticking their tongue out and spitting out gems etc. definitely create a heightened sexual feel to the song. Following the “Monroe” dance

featured above, Dal Shabet returned with a boob-rubbing move and a pelvis-touching move in “B.B.B.” Lyrics like “you’re a big baby baby” and “I wanna get your body tonight baby” are also quite suggestive. Lastly, Girl’s Day put on a more mature but equally provoking sexy concept when compared to their song “Female President.” In “Something,” members were seen swiping their dress aside to flash their thighs and then use a feather to stroke their legs and their face. They also spread their legs apart and slide along the floor while twisting their butt at the beginning⁴⁵. In February 2014, the big three television channels, KBS, SBS and MBC, announced that they would be applying restrictions and sanctions on sexy concepts due to complaints by citizens (Allkpop 2014b). In the past, different groups with provocative or controversial moves and outfits have been asked to alter those sensitive elements. Korean netizens were also very critical about the situation. They left comments like “Showing your body for benefits... How are they any different from prostitutes?” (Netizenbuzz 2014b) and “I understand that this can be a form of art performance but girl groups don’t look artsy at all but rather like pub girls... If stripping and dancing are two components of being a singer, then a lot of people can be singers” (Netizenbuzz 2014c).

However, these sexy concepts didn’t come out of nowhere because the entertainment agencies are running out of ideas. In fact, sexy concepts are trending because they guarantee attention from the public, regardless of good or bad. Stellar, an unpopular 4-member girl group that debuted in 2011, managed to catch the spotlight by releasing a new single “Marionette.”



Image 3-24. Stellar’s promotion picture. Captions says, “the more likes you click, the more is unveiled!” (Source: Netizenbuzz 2014b)

⁴⁵ For AllKpop’s opinion on the four groups, see <http://www.allkpop.com/article/2014/02/ranking-the-sexy-girl-groups-of-january-aoa-girls-day-dal-shabet-and-rainbow-blaxx>

First of all, they came back with a promotion teaser that imitates a type of Japanese pornography magazine, where readers can peel off the top layer of sticker (which is the girl's clothes) to reveal her undergarment. In Stellar's case, they blurred the picture so that when a certain amounts of Facebook "likes" is received, a certain section will be revealed (Image 3-13). In their music video, the choreography features butt twisting, leg spreading, butt scratching and inner-thighs caressing. There were also scenes like a member drinks milk and drips it all over her chest (thus, camera zooms in on her chest) and a member bathing in a bathtub filled with milk. In fact, the music video has a 18+ year restriction on Youtube, which is rare in the K-Pop industry. However, all these tactics worked really well. Stellar's old music videos usually had 100,000-200,000 views, but "Marionette" easily broke 2 millions views within days⁴⁶. Korean news source Dispatch even made a graph to demonstrate how well sex sells. As show in Image 15, Girl's Day nearly doubled their album sales (5,000 to 8,000 copies) when they debuted a sexy concept; SISTAR went from 6,000 to 10,000. However, Dal Shabet's sales did not increase by much (637 to 640).

Since the female artists are receiving so much hate and criticism from the public, girl groups are surprisingly coming out to express their opinions on the matter. Most of them emphasis that their concept is not a dirty kind of sexy but "a mature but charismatic sexy" or "a bit fantasy-like," (NetizenBuzz 2014a) leaving their viewers to imagine what happens next. Stellar said that the public is taking their concepts in the wrong direction:

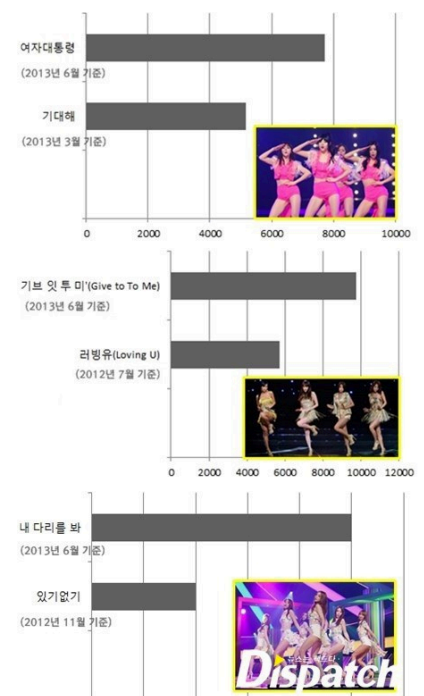


Image 25 Comparing girl groups Girl's Day, SISTAR and Dal Shabet's sales before and after taking on a sexy concept. (source: Nate 뉴스)

⁴⁶ On February 27, two weeks after the release, the video has 2.7 million hits.

“We didn't try to be erotic but we tried to show that we not only possess the image of a younger sister but that we also have mature charms... We wanted to showcase our average height of 170 cm, lengthy arms and legs, and the highlights of our physical features but it got received in a negative light, which wasn't our intention, so we do feel a bit sad about that.” (Allkpop 2014c)

They believe that their dance is in fact an empowering one where they get to flaunt their physical attributes and personal charms. However, the public can't seem to see it the same way.

APink, a group that is known for their cutesy and innocent concept, also made a surprising statement recently. Member Eunji says, “I wonder if [APink or girl groups in general] can keep being cute. Sometimes, acting cute gives me goosebumps.” Girl's Day member Minah agrees, “I give off a very strong cute vibe . . . Truthfully, when someone tells me I'm cute, I feel like I haven't been acknowledged as a woman” (Allkpop 2014d). Korean girl groups take on the innocent concept because the society values chastity. However, it limits females to have only one specific type of identity. The society does not provide enough outlets for female to present their non-innocent side (it can be sexy, corrupt, edgy, wild, etc.). In many ways, the K-Pop scene is the outlet; it provides a place where females can identify with personalities that are different from what is expected and accepted in mainstream society. By buying into the cool 2NE1, elegant yet sexy SISTAR, alluring Miss A, or any of the groups mentioned above, Korean women can find examples in the media who defies the norm. In that case, Eunji and Minah's statements are powerful and poignant – women in Korea feel unnatural to being cute all the time, and in fact, it makes them feel like part of themselves can never be acknowledged by others.

What does all this make of K-Pop and femininity in Korea? What does it mean when female celebrities are hoping to break way from their innocent image? Currently, K-Pop is at the fork in the road where idols have to negotiate between being mature, attractive and classy all

at the same time (I am aware that there are groups that do not have to face this “mid-life crisis”). Many currently promoting groups have already outlived their cutesy styles and need to take on the sexier concepts in order to compete with other groups. Yet, doing a sexy concept is always tricky, since it can easily become low-class and promiscuous in the (more conservative) consumer’s eyes, and the public can easily take it the wrong way. There is a fine line between objectifying women and showcasing one’s charm.

But all these challenges and debates regarding the K-Pop industry reflect changes within the society. Although consumers are criticizing these sexy concepts, they are also (happily) consuming them at the same time. For example, 4Minute’s Hyuna has been praised as being naturally sexy but Koreans also equate her a prostitute. Netizens comments that “Hyuna could just be wearing jeans and a t-shirt and be oozing an erotic vibe,” while another says “Hyuna is sexy but the cheap kind of sexy...” (NetizenBuzz 2013c). However, one netizen’s comment is insightful: “Imagine if Hyuna was a great singer, she wouldn’t be hated to this extent. Probably actually praised. It’s because she tries to cover for her lack of singing skills with erotic dances and skimpy clothing that makes people turned off.” If that is the case, when a woman is talented, she is then qualified to employ a sexy concept because it won’t overshadow what she is showcasing (singing, dancing, acting etc.) But when a woman is not qualified enough, her

sexiness becomes her only asset, and it outshines other characteristics of her. If that is the Korean consumer’s concept, then a sexy concept can never stand-alone by itself. It is only the icing on the cake.

I can’t help but think that it is healthy

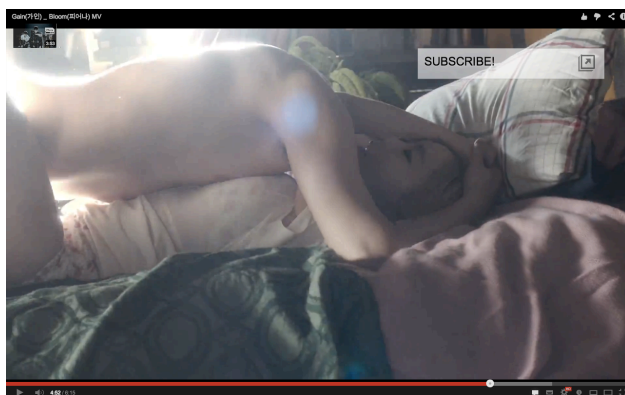


Image 3-26. One of the bed scenes in the Ga-in’s “Bloom” music video (Sources: 1theK 2012)

to present diverse representations of femininity. For example, Brown Eyed Girls Ga-In's song "Bloom" (피어나) garnered a lot of attention regarding her R-Rated music video, featuring bed scenes and her masturbating on the kitchen floor. Even though the concept was unprecedented, it received some good feedback as it demonstrates that women can be proud of their bodies and



Image 3-27. The scene of Ga-In masturbating in the kitchen (sources: 1thK 2012)

have full ownership of their bodies. She also illustrates how it is okay for women to outwardly express their appreciation and fondness for sex. Seeing that a female lyricist Kim Eana worked on three of the tracks (including "Bloom") in the album, this work stands for women's take in defining beauty and sexuality in Korea. Overall,

It will take time to find the healthier ways of highlighting sex and femininity, but shutting all the sexy concepts out is not the solution.

I believe one of the major problems regarding Kpop production is that most of the Kpop producers right now are males. It is undeniably harder for men to write a song in a woman's perspective since "male gaze" is the dominant way of seeing within a patriarchal society. Also, the target audiences of female idols are mainly men/boys. Agencies would rather sell songs that guarantee approval from the male population than producing ones that small number of female fans would support. Given that Korean female has been the "meaning bearer" this whole time, it will not be easy for them to breakthrough either. This is reflective of the greater Korean society as well. Given the glass ceiling effect and tendency for women to become full-time housewives after marriage, Korean women have to find other outlets through which they can voice their opinions and bring changes. Female celebrities can play a huge role by beginning the dialogue

regarding femininity in Korea. I hope that as we see more female soloists and groups experimenting with the sexy concept, they will establish meaningful ways of displaying sexiness – classy and empowering instead of trashy and objectifying. Furthermore, it is important for female idols have a say over what concept they want to take on. I appreciate the dialogues they are starting in the media, since it will help the audience to question their own views in femininity as well. It will be interesting to watch how Kpop girl idols evolve in the coming years. Will they be able to successfully transform into mature concepts without being objectified? How far will they go? We shall see.

Chapter 4

“I Don’t Know What Kind of Love This Is, but I Love You!”⁴⁷: The Analysis of Marriage, Love and Fantasy in *We Got Married*

Amongst the many Korean reality television shows I have watched, I find “우리 결혼했어요” (*We Got Married*), to be the most unique variety program in many aspects. The TV show debuted in March 2008 on MBC and has received good reviews and support due to its unique execution: the show pairs up two popular Korean celebrities as “imaginary couples” and give them missions to complete as a pair. There are certain standard missions – like moving into a new home, going to honeymoon and taking a wedding photo shoot. Other than these, missions are usually personalized – including spending time with each spouse’s friends and family, going on dates, throwing surprise events and so on. In that sense, the show features a step-by-step tutorial on marriage (or more like dating) but also reflects the audiences’ projection of what dating should be like in Korea. The production team also conducts private interviews with each participant and asks them to reveal their honest thoughts and feelings regarding what happened during the recording. There are, on average, three pairs of imaginary couples participating in the program at the same time. Each week, the program divides the hour-long airing time accordingly to feature all three couples. At times, the show will host missions that feature all the active couples, for example, a haunted house mission during Halloween or a group housewarming party. In addition to the couples, there are permanent hosts for the show who comment on the progress of the marriages.

⁴⁷ *We Got Married* season one participant Ga-In Son wrote this line in the one-year anniversary letter to her imaginary husband Jo Kwon. Source: <https://es-es.facebook.com/notes/korean-music/gain-writes-a-letter-to-jo-kwon-for-their-one-year-anniversary/10150127916594196>

Thanks to the careful casting, the show has produced a lot of popular couples that exhibit different types of couple pairings with interesting dynamics. In the past, there were couples that were featured as first-time lovers, some as older female-younger male pairings, some as couples with different cultural backgrounds. However, once the show ended, the two lovers parted and returned to their original lives. They were supposed to feel no traces of love or longing for their ex-partner. It was as if they had gotten an actual divorce.

One of the most controversial aspects of the show is whether the interactions between the couples are scripted or not. Of course, no one except the production team and the participants know. But most viewers believe that it is a combination of both scripted and organic interactions; the missions and traveling plans are obviously pre-planned but the interactions and what is being said seem natural. Fans also believe that surprise events are usually unscripted also.

We Got Married (shortened as *WGM*) has acquired a large fan base within Korea and around the world. One can easily find fan pages in different languages for each couple on social media sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, Weibo, Baidu and fan-made blogs. There is also a huge network of fans who voluntarily translate and add subtitles⁴⁸ to *WGM* videos. *WGM* has turned into an outlet through which Koreans can reinforce their expectations for love and marriage and through which non-Koreans can learn about the dating and marriage culture in Korea.

I will argue here that *We Got Married* is a reflection of Korea's idealized image of romance and marriage. The show showcases types of acceptable lovers/couples, recommended ways to express one's love and affection, and ways of ending a relationship. This is because the

⁴⁸ On Viki.com, the show has been translated into English, Chinese, Japanese, Thai, Indonesian, Tagalog, French, Spanish, German and Dutch.

production team is extremely sensitive to the public's reaction to the show – they carefully pick couples that the public will favor and pull out couples that do not garner much success. In the long run, the show becomes a product that indicates what the public likes or dislikes, deems acceptable and unacceptable about love. For example, the show once paired Taeyeon, the leader from popular girl group Girls' Generation, with Jeong Hyeong Don, a popular stand-up comedian. Although both individuals were very well-liked by the public, they were not well-liked as a couple. The couple only lasted for 12 episodes, one of the shortest in *WGM* broadcasting history. The reasons were manifold. First, the couple had an 11 year age gap (Jeong being older). Second, Taeyeon was only 19 at the time, a relatively young age to “get married.” Third, Taeyeon and Jeong were not a good match personality-wise: Taeyeon is known for being carefree, dorky and outspoken, while Jeong is known for his short and chubby stature, introversion, awkwardness and laziness. Lastly, Jeong disclosed that he was dating at the time of the pseudo marriage (soshified 2009), which brought into question Taeyeon's status in the marriage and whether Jeong was “two timing.” While the production team might have thought pairing the two would reflect the trend of older men marrying younger women in Korea⁴⁹, some other elements (young marrying age, unfit image/personality, suggestion of unfaithfulness) made the public disapprove of the couple. Therefore, *WGM* is ultimately a representation of what the Korean public approves of.

⁴⁹ Koreans are no strangers to the practice of a young woman (in her 20s) marrying a much older man (mid-30s to 40s). They call this “*yonsang*” (). Some believe that this is due to the traditional culture where women usually become a housewife after marriage. Thus, women prefer men who have a stable income, and even better, well-off. Read this blog for more information: <http://westerngirleasterboy.com/2013/09/28/dating-in-korea/>. This link includes celebrities who are in such relationships: <http://netizenbuzz.blogspot.com/2013/04/pann-celebrity-couples-with-big-age-gaps.html>.

In this chapter, I want to address the following questions: One, how does *WGM* portray of marriage in Korea and is it accurate? Two, what kind of love and relationship is the show promoting? Three, why is *WGM* popular both locally and internationally? What is the unifying theme that attracts viewers within and outside of Korea?

I. History of Marriage in Korea

In order to evaluate if *WGM*'s portrayal of marriage is reflective of Korean culture, we have to first understand marriage practices in Korea. I will use Laurel Kendall's *Getting Married In Korea: of Gender, Morality, and Modernity* (1996), an in-depth ethnography of both traditional and modern wedding practices in Korea in the 1990s, to provide historical background. Basically, there are two main types of wedding in Korea: the "old style" (*kuisik*) and the "new style" (*sinsik*). The old style refers to the traditional Korean wedding ceremony (*honrye*) that was influenced by Chinese and Japanese practices and emerged during the late Koryo dynasty (918-1392) and early Choson dynasty (1392-1910) (Kendall 1996:69). Between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries, major social institutions were transformed to correspond to "the Confucian vision of a harmonious and well-ordered society" (Kendall 1996:58). Since kinship regulation was crucial to implementing this Confucian vision, the wedding practice was further refined using the rites outlined in Chinese and Confucianism-derived texts (Kendall 1996:57). Overall, traditional marriage was patriarchal and patrilocal since wives were required to move away from their maternal home to live with their husbands' family after marriage. The wedding ceremony, the last of the six steps in the ritual, is performed in the broad courtyard (*madang*) of the bride's country home (Kendall 1996:53). Due to the elaborate and expensive procedures, the Confucian wedding rite was a custom that only nobles (*yangban*) could afford. For example, the groom's family had to hire a learned member of the community to determine

an auspicious hour for the wedding, and the bride's family needed to hire slaves or commoner tenants to perform customary services like carrying the bridal sedan chair and transporting ceremonious goods (Kendall 1996:62). Overall, the whole process is very elaborate and uses a lot of Sino-Korean terms that modern Koreans are not familiar with.

A Korean *sinsik* wedding is very much similar to a Western-style wedding. The origins of the new style are “both Western and at least mildly iconoclastic” (Kendall 1996:63). In the late nineteenth century, Christian missionaries introduced the prototype because they viewed the “Christian marriage as an instrument of family reform” (Kendall 1996:63). The new wedding “confounded the patriarchal order with a new public affirmation of mutual respect between husband and wife” (Kendall 1996:63). Since then, a wedding profession (*yesigōp*) has been established to officiate for non-Christian couples (Kendall 1996:65). Instead of being held at a traditional home, the ceremony is performed in churches, hotel ballrooms, or commercial wedding halls that are unique to Korea. These commercial wedding halls provide one-stop marriage planning services; one can purchase and rent every single item needed there, like the bride's gown, flowers and appropriate piano music (Kendall 1996:55).

Starting in the 1960s, more and more Koreans, especially urban dwellers, opted for these simpler *sinsik* weddings. They criticized the old practice as “long, complicated, and difficult to follow because the procedures are declaimed in arcane Sino-Korean” (Kendall 1996:55). In 1969, the government released The Family Ritual Code (*Kajōng Ūirye Chunch'ik*). The code was intended to curb the unproductive use of time and resources for ritual activities, “to do away with harmful practices [which] imply nothing more than elitism and a fruitless waste of energy in the obsessive pursuit of face and, as a consequence, pose many obstacles to modern social life” (Kim et al. 1983:339, Kendall 1996: 68). The law regularized the procedures for

sinsik weddings by prohibiting feasts and circumscribing the length of rituals (Kendall 1996:69). Today, weddings are streamlined to run within an hour, including only the ceremony, a buffet meal and a picture session. The procedures are very structured; Korean blogger Ask The Expat (2009) outlines it clearly: “When you arrive at the [wedding hall], hand [the money gift] to the collection table, sign the book and they'll give you a ticket which will get you into the buffet either before, during or after the ceremony. If you're a little late, then wait to go into the buffet until after the post-wedding pictures have been taken.” There is always more than one wedding happening within the multistoried wedding hall, so there will be multiple parties eating within the buffet hall at the same time.

Having said that, there has been a revival of traditional weddings in urban settings since the 1980s (Kendall 1996:74). Institutions like The Korean House, the Confucian Academy and Namsangol Hanok Village have arisen to provide commercial services for the convenience of enacting the *kuisik* wedding. Similar to the wedding halls described above, these venues provide traditional costumes, prepared offering trays, photographs and a trained officiant. Some even incorporate a second officiant who translates the primary officiant's Sino-Korean declamations into pure Korean (Kendall 1996:75). Overall, the revival of traditional weddings rests on “a profound rethinking of the old wedding sufficient to transform a domestic celebration into a commercial service, a rite of kinship into an austere celebration of national identity” (Kendall 1996:76). The reason why Koreans have reconsidered *kuisik* weddings is mainly because they are more “fun” and evoke nostalgia and a sense of fulfilling one's cultural responsibility.

II. Marriages within *We Got Married*

In the four seasons of *WGM*, only a few couples have gotten to experience a full-length wedding ceremony. Most couples only get to participate in a wedding photo shoot and perhaps a

honeymoon. This is because wedding ceremonies always involve the bride and groom's family but family members are usually not featured within the show. Taking the family component out of the custom would make the wedding seem unnatural to the local Korean viewers. However, there are some exceptions. In the following section, I will analyze how *WGM* overcomes the lack of family participation by personalizing the *sinsik* and the *kusik* wedding.

(i) *sinsik* wedding

In 2013, *We Got Married* produced a Global Edition in which they paired up two Korean male celebrities with one Taiwanese female celebrity and one Japanese female celebrity. Lee Hongki (groom) from FT. Island and Japanese star Fujii Mina (bride) had an elaborate *sinsik* wedding. The couple planned the wedding together. The ceremony was held in the courtyard of their house. Fujii wore a Western-style wedding gown and Lee a suit. They invited around 20 friends from the entertainment industry and invited Lee's band mate to emcee for the ceremony. Friends who weren't able to make it to the wedding actually sent in flower plaques⁵⁰ to Lee. Instead of saying the standard marriage vow, they recited poems that they had written for each other. This is Lee's poem:

The feeling of never able to confess before, you understand;
The you who brought me (who have never confessed) into the light, I love;
No matter how dim the future road will be, we will light our surroundings with our love;
You and I will love each other forever. (*We Got Married Global Edition*, Episode 8)

After exchanging their rings, the pair was serenaded by two of their friends. During the line "I hope you can become my bride," Lee pecked Fujii on the cheek. After the song, another friend announced that they were going to do a sudden "event"⁵¹ – a fitness test for the groom. They asked Lee to pick up Fujii then squat down and stand up three times. He had to yell "bride"

⁵⁰ It is a Korean tradition to send huge flower plaques with congratulatory sayings when one cannot attend a celebratory event. People also send in flower plaques when a person has a performance or store opening.

⁵¹ 이벤트 (ebenteu) Korean pronunciation of the word "event," usually means a surprise that someone prepared.

when squatting and “I love you” when standing back up. During the dark room interview, Fujii was asked about the difference between Japanese and Korean weddings. She said that they were very different and asked, “Is [throwing a surprise event] part of the wedding culture in Korea?” She was surprised by the event, especially how they asked the groom to outright yell, “I love you.”

Overall, Lee and Fujii’s wedding was quite different from how normal weddings proceed within Korea. The *WGM* version is much more carefree and the family aspect is replaced by friends and colleagues who are of similar ages. While some of the key rituals like exchanging wedding rings remained, others, like reading the vows, were done in an innovative and more personal way. This wedding was definitely more special and intimate than the commercialized weddings that are done within wedding halls. *WGM* successfully demonstrated that weddings can be fun and personalized. It encouraged the viewers to break away from the

current structure and hold more individualized ceremonies. In fact, fans and audience sometimes refer to a *WGM* wedding as a model or a reference for their future weddings. However, given price and time constraints, these weddings may not be something that members of the general public can easily do on their own.

(ii) *kuisik* wedding



Image 4-28. *Kuisik* wedding between Naeun and Taemin (source: Taemin and Naeun – We Got Married Couple)

For the wedding between Taemin (groom) from SHINee and Naeun (bride) from APink, WGM planned a thorough *kuisik*, the first in its five year history. The long ceremony was split into two episodes (32 and 33) and the production team added in special subtitles to explain each step of the wedding. Before the ceremony, Taemin asked Naeun if she invited anyone. She answered that she had invited a person very close to her. Taemin asked if the person was her mother and Naeun said no (she had invited one of her group members). After changing into traditional gowns (*hanbok*) separately, the groom stood outside of Naeun's room. The show romanticized the moment when the blinds were raised up so the pair got to see each other in wedding gowns for the first time.

Soon, Taemin's closest friends arrived with two live chickens as presents. The friends joked that they looked like pictures in a history textbook. Contrary to what people would have done in traditional times, Taemin and Naeun both held up the victory sign⁵² while



Image 4-29. Victory signs with traditional clothes (source: Taemin and Naeun – We Got Married Couple)

taking pictures (image 4-2). Then, an officiant came in and indicated that the wedding should begin. She asked which one of the three male attendees would like to be the one to carry the chicken (*anbu*)⁵³. The attendees proceeded to the broad courtyard (*madang*) while the bride took the bridal sedan chair. Initially, Naeun had a hard time fitting herself through the small opening

⁵² The “V” sign when people raise up their index and middle figure. It is deemed as an action that many Asians do when posing for pictures.

⁵³ Usually, the person who holds the chickens is the groom's brother or closest friend. The rooster is wrapped in blue cloth, the hen in red. The rooster is associated with crowing in the morning. It symbolizes that beginning of a fresh start and act to drive evil spirits away. The hen stands for fertility and wishes the bride to have many children. <http://www.lifeinkorea.com/culture/marriage/marriage.cfm?xURL=meaning>

of the sedan chair. The officiant had to teach her what to do. The couple then carried out rites like bowing to each other, exchanging wine, etc. Afterwards, Taemin's friend and Naeun's teammate gave congratulatory speeches resembling those given by the *churye*⁵⁴. While listening to the speeches, Naeun started tearing up, as did her teammate. Then, all four guests played the role of family members and accepted the couple's first official bow/greeting after their marriage.

Watching the traditional wedding was a learning experience for both local and international viewers. This is because the program included an explanation given by the officiant and deliberately added in detailed subtitles to explain the Sino-Korean ceremonial terms. Additionally, the couple, their friends and the program hosts all exclaimed "Oh," "now I understand" while viewing the ceremony. Even Koreans (especially the younger generations) are unfamiliar with the details of a traditional wedding. The friends commented that the couple looked like people coming out of a history textbook, attesting to the fact that *kuisik* weddings are rarely practiced. Nowadays, most people find the *kusik* wedding too complicated time-consuming. However, they are fun to watch. As bride Naeun commented, "At the beginning, I find [sic] the traditional wedding very interesting, but listening to [the officiant's explanation], I felt like I suddenly got more serious and sincere" (*We Got Married* Season 4 Episode 32).

Although the couple and their friends (they are all about twenty years old) found the wedding rituals very awkward and unfamiliar, they managed to personalize and modernize certain parts to make it more relevant to their lives. For example, when the couple held up the victory sign while wearing *hanbok*, it displayed an immediate clash between the traditional and

⁵⁴ A *churye* is the groom's teacher and mentor, an appropriate person to congratulate and advise the groom on his wedding day. During the wedding, the couple stands before the master of ceremonies (*churye*) who addresses them from behind a pulpit like podium in a tableau that resembles a wedding ceremony in a Christian church (53).

the modern. The fact that Naeun and her teammate cried meant that the *kuisik* ceremony felt realistic enough to both of them: her teammate actually felt like she was sending a close friend away, while Naeun felt touched by having a close friend sending her off.

In both its *sinsik* and *kusik* weddings, *WGM* is able to make up for the lack of family attendance through the participation of friends. Inviting people of similar ages makes the ceremony more dynamic and less formalized when compared to regular weddings. Both couples were able to make their ceremonies more personalized and meaningful to them by inviting only their closest friends to witness the special moment. Everyone at the ceremony knew each other, which is very different from the usual practice, whereby the bride and groom's family try to invite as many friends and relatives as possible. In fact, the weddings within *WGM* are representative of the neoliberal ideals within Korea. Nancy Abelman et al. (2009) demonstrates how Korean college students take on "the burden of managing their personal formation" (242) due to the society's neoliberal influence. The students in the study all carefully examined their school's strengths and weaknesses and critically thought through what kind of jobs or extracurricular activities to take on in the near future. While parents have a huge impact on what kind of goals and plans these students made for their lives, they were very much absent in providing guidance to these young people. The young couples being portrayed in *We Got Married* are similar in that parents are entirely absent from one of the most important events in their lives. No parental guidance on how the wedding should proceed is shown and friends replace all the parental figures instead. While it is fun to watch a wedding with only friends and no elders, it is also alarming to see that the older generations' wisdom and supervision are totally taken out of the show, especially on a matter that is so closely related to one's lineage and legacy.

III. Confluent Love and Arranged Marriage within *We Got Married*

As an avid supporter of *WGM*, I was blinded to the fact that the show is technically depicting arranged marriages within the celebrity world. In Korea, weddings fall into two categories, depending on how one meets his or her other half: “love” (*yōnae*) or “matchmade” (*chungmae*) weddings (Kendall 1996:3). In this case, all the marriages on *WGM* are *chungmae* marriages since the celebrities do not have a choice in choosing who their partner will be. In fact, that is what makes watching the show so heartwarming – the viewers get to watch the couple transform from total strangers to people who genuinely care about each other. It seems to promote the idea that a good relationship requires hard work from both parties, not necessarily through meeting the perfect person.

This mindset reminds me of Anthony Giddens’ theory on intimate relationships within late modern social settings. In his book *The Transformation of Intimacy* (1992), Giddens suggests the emergence of “confluent love” and the “pure relationship” as reflections of a wider social shift towards new forms of self-identity. As Giddens (1991) defines it, a “pure relationship” ‘exists solely for whatever rewards that relationship as such can deliver’ (6). In other words, people enter into a pure relationship for mutual benefit and will sustain it as long as it remains reciprocal. A pure relationship is sustained by “confluent love” instead of “romantic love.” Romantic love stands for the idea that there is a special someone with whom you should fall in love and enter into a relationship forever. It is the person that makes the relationship special; additionally, romantic love is usually anchored to some external social and economic conditions. Confluent love is based off of mutuality and does not value the mentality of finding a person’s “one and only”. It is the action that makes the relationship worthwhile. Giddens (1992) describe it as an ‘active, contingent love’ (61) that ‘presumes equality in

emotional give and take' (1991: 62). He believes that trust can no longer be based on exterior factors such as kinship, social duty, or traditional obligation, but "can only be mobilised [sic] by a process of mutual disclosure' (Giddens 1991:6). The two people have to be willing to open up to each other and share about themselves. The disclosure also includes one's body: "confluent love also relies on reciprocal sexual pleasure as a core element of a relationship" (van Hoff 2019:3). Overall, romantic love refers to pre-industrial period marriages, most of which were arranged in order to increase one's economic well-being and chances for social mobility; the wife has little or no say in how she is treated in the relationship since her livelihood relies on the husband. On the other hand, confluent love resembles the more egalitarian partnership that is based upon the equality of man and woman within the relationship. The woman has the right to sever relations if the man does not reciprocate. Having said that, Giddens (1991) notices that confluent love is particularly difficult to achieve, as upholding a relationship that is balanced and rewarding for both partners is one of its 'intrinsic travails' (1991:91).

If we apply Giddens' theory to *WGM*, then the show demonstrates the raw enactment of confluent love but with the inability to voluntarily end the relationship. Since every marriage is pre-arranged, the couples on the show have no choice but to perform an "active, contingent love." They cannot stop giving to the relationship; otherwise the show would be meaningless and unappealing. Having said that, what makes the show intriguing is the level of reciprocation between the couple, how fast the two open up to each other for "mutual disclosure" and how they balance out the relationship. *WGM* successfully provides the audience different blueprints of what confluent love can be like by recording these couples' journey towards building an egalitarian partnership. It acts as a marriage textbook by showing that two people who are shy towards each other; an extremely innocent lover paired with a love expert; or a really outgoing

person and a person who doesn't like to speak his or her mind can all make happy couples as long as both sides put in the effort.

If a couple has managed to stay on the show for an extended period of time, it means that they have garnered the public's approval through their ways of expressing love and overcoming hardships. Their interactions on air become the ideal image and representation of love and marriage to viewers. With the charm of being a celebrity and the help of post-production editing, *WGM* couples stand for the "ideal ego" in real life. Having said that, there are also couples who simply do not work out either because their views on marriage are too different or because their personalities don't seem to create any sparks. In the following section, we will look at how *WGM* further delivers the matchmaking experience to the audience.

Etiquette book *Passage Rites Made Easy* describes marriage through an arranged meeting as a more "rational" (*hamnijōk*) behavior than simply falling in love because the candidates for romance and matrimony have already been carefully scrutinized by parents and matchmakers (KO 1982:55, Kendall 1996:89). This can be said about *WGM* also. The television production team acts as professional matchmaker who pulls together celebrities that they think will complement each other and trigger moments that are fun to watch.

Until today, Koreans (especially if one is from a more traditional family or is a middle-age bachelor) still attend arranged meetings (*massōn*⁵⁵) in order to meet their potential spouses. What happens is that the parents bring their children to have a meal together and then leave halfway through to let the couple converse amongst themselves. Arranged meetings nowadays are "a friendly exchange with the possibility of marriage on the introduction of someone with considerable experience of social life" (Kendall 1996:107). However, they are still extremely awkward situations. One of the participants in Kendall's study described it thusly:

⁵⁵ It literally means "mutual first"

“You feel a thrill of anticipation and then, as soon as you sit down, the atmosphere of the arranged meeting takes over. I felt as though I was a spectacle for people to look at. (‘Like an animal in a zoo!’ her father inserts with a teasing cackle.)...

And then when the parents leave, and you’re alone with this man you don’t know in the least, he asks you thinks like, ‘How many brothers and sisters do you have?’ and ‘What sort of music do you like?’ It’s the strangest conversation. You know that you’re not there because of something between the two of you. You’re there because you’re from two suitable families. You can’t forget that. It puts a damper on conversation. You can’t just talk in a normal way.” (Kendall 1996:108)

In reality, the purpose of a *massōn* is to provide a chance for the man and woman to evaluate their potential spouse within a short amount of time and convey their decision to the matchmaker. However, in *WGM*, there is no such opportunity. Each couple’s first arranged meeting is much more similar to the ones done in the Korean traditional wedding day when the bride and groom met for the first time.

A good example within *WGM* is the first meet-up between Jong Yonghwa (groom) from C.N.Blue and Seo-hyun (bride) from Girl’s Generation. Seo is known for being extremely innocent and shy while Jong is bold and talkative. Before the couple’s first meeting, Seo promises her group mates that she will indicate whether she likes the groom or not using the secret code of “sweet potato” (*goguma*) or “hamburger.”⁵⁶ On the other hand, Jong Yonghwa decided to pull a prank on his future bride by pushing one of his group members – Lee Jongshin – to pretend to be the groom of the show. While Seo naively believed that Lee was her groom, Jong kept grilling her with questions: “Did you notice him at first?” “How old are you?” “Do you like dating someone older, younger or the same age as you?” “Who do you like the most out of the band?” etc. It was smart of Jong to pretend he was not the groom so he could ask these questions without making her uncomfortable. During the dark room interview, Seo stated that she had a good impression of Jong and said, “I find [the fake out event] interesting, he seems to be someone who enjoys pulling pranks on others. At the time, I totally forgot about the

⁵⁶ Seohyun’s favorite food is sweet potato, which is why it is used as a secret code.

sweet potato/hamburger mission⁵⁷.” As for Jong, he commented, “She is so pretty, her eyes are especially bright and honest... I have never met a person with such [unique] character before, that’s why I am worried... I am not as innocent.” After the band members left, the couple suddenly became really awkward around each other. Jong tried to relieve the situation by saying, “well, it is impossible for two people to be really close all of a sudden anyways” (*We Got Married* Season 2 Episode 40). Seeing that there wasn’t much to talk about, Seo took out a notebook from her backpack and said that she had prepared a list of questions to ask Jong, making Jong feel really unprepared and embarrassed. Later on in the episode, Jong suggested that they speak without honorifics⁵⁸ (*banmal*) but Seo insisted that she could not do it. Jong complained, “But we are married now!” to which Seo replied, “but we haven’t even met for more than 30 minutes!” (*We Got Married* Season 2 Episode 40), expressing her annoyance that merely by being labeled “married”, they were suddenly expected to be psychologically intimate.

Jong and Seo’s first meeting demonstrates the frustration and awkwardness of arranged meetings. Although the couple could not exactly say “no” to the relationship, they still tried to show the best side of themselves to the other half. Viewers were able to feel that tension and carefulness between the two characters simply by watching them interact. One could also tell that both parties had put some thought into how to get closer to the other half – easing the tension through pulling a prank or organizing a list of things to ask. Viewers were able to witness how Jong tried his best in making Seo more comfortable: he made jokes and tried to

⁵⁷ The goguma rating ends up being a theme that runs through out their whole marriage. Seohyun gave Jong Yonghwa a goguma/burger (right in the middle) rating at the end of their first meeting.

⁵⁸ Korean language uses a system of honorifics to help define the speaker’s relationship to the subject of the sentence and speech levels to reflect the speaker’s relationship to the listener. Usually, people of the same age do not use honorifics with each other, which they call *banmal* (literally means even words). A speaker uses honorifics when he or she is addressing an older person. However, people who have really close relationship with each other, including siblings and lovers usually speak *banmal* with each other to convey the feeling of intimacy.

adjust to something with which she was more comfortable⁵⁹. Although many viewers might not have gone to an arranged meeting before, the video echoed with the experience of meeting a person they like for the first time. At the end of Jong and Seo's marriage, they decided to reenact their first meeting on the show. Although they wore the same outfit, went to the same places and tried to discuss the same topics, any viewer could tell that the pair had grown much closer to each other and had probably developed some feelings for each other. If anything, the pair has shown that two people can love each other even if they seem vastly different and distant in the beginning.

IV. *We Got Married* as a Space for Fantasy

(i) The Power of Identification and Imagination

Unlike most other variety shows, *WGM* fits in the category between variety show and television drama. While the show captures real conversations and reactions from participants, it also provides its viewers with a love story. The narrative talks about two protagonists falling in love with each other; each episode contributes to the story by presenting highlights like the couple's first time holding hands, first kiss, and first fight. Although *We Got Married* is not a piece of literature, it shares similar characteristics with a romance novel and a romance drama. The show creates an opportunity for fans to imagine that they are dating their favorite celebrity. Janice Radway's theory in *Reading the Romance* (1984) of why women read romance novels is helpful in understanding what viewers enjoy and gain out of watching *WGM*.

According to Radway (1984), readers of romance novels live vicariously through their novel characters: "What [romance novel readers] enjoy most about romance reading is the opportunity to project themselves into the story, to become the heroine, and thus to share her

⁵⁹ Since Seohyun really enjoys reading, he suggested to have a date at the library next time, which Seohyun agreed to immediately.

surprise and slowly awakening pleasure at being so closely watched by someone who finds her valuable and worthy of love” (67). Radway’s theory taps into the two larger concepts in this paper – Lacan’s lack and Mulvey’s male gaze. Women read romance stories because they want to be loved, a desire that stem from the discrepancy between what they conceive an ideal romance should be like (constantly loved and valued) and how they experience love in real life (not as satisfactory). Reading these novels quenches their thirst for romance in real life. Moreover, romance novels genre introduces a flip side of the “male gaze.” Since the genre is geared towards female readership, romance novels are often narrated from the female’s point of view. The genre is bold and unafraid when it comes to extolling male beauty. Thus, men become the object of women’s gaze, fitting to the idea of “female gaze.” Unlike most other literary genres, the heavy female readership does not look for a “male-identified heroine” (All About Romance Novels 1997). Instead, the protagonist has to be identifiable by every female, especially through her common aspiration for love, career, family and friends.

While Mulvey introduces “the gaze” as the way through which viewers identify with the movie characters, Radway suggests that readers identify with the characters through projection. Humans have always projected themselves or their emotions onto other people. For example, we are often asked to project other people’s situations onto ourselves in order to walk in another person’s shoes. We understand other people by imagining ourselves to be that person and by transferring his or her emotions or desires to ourselves. At the same time, we want other people to understand us by doing the same. We want to read stories that can be applied to ourselves. In social media, we want to see our own ethnicity, race, gender, etc. positively represented. We want to have role models who are similar to ourselves so we can easily project our own image onto them - believing one day, we can also be successful like them.

Thus, it is important for writers and screenwriters to create characters who are likable and relatable to the audience. If the heroine is too perfect, too far from the “norm”, then viewers will find it harder to relate to her. In *WGM*, the production team doesn’t necessarily create a character but rather does the opposite by letting the celebrities behave as they naturally would. Normally, celebrities seem too perfect to be projected onto, but *WGM* makes the process possible by recording celebrities partaking in mundane activities and thus taking away their glamorous facade. After seeing these celebrities doing things that the viewers also do, viewers can now believe that the celebrities are relatable. In addition, *WGM* conducts individual interviews with each participant in a black interview room. These interviews play a significant role in helping the viewers understand and identify with the characters since they allow participants to reveal their actual feelings and impressions of what happened on the show. Frequently, the participants reveal that they told white lies to cover up their actual feelings at the moment (due to many different reasons, like saving face, not to hurt the other half’s feelings, for politeness’ sake etc.). Participants are more likely to admit their romantic feelings towards the other half during the interviews as well, probably because it takes courage to say it in front of other people. Through the candid interviews, viewers are able to relate to the celebrities because they experience similar feelings (embarrassment, jealousy, uneasiness etc.) in the face of love, and take similar actions (telling white lies, pulling pranks, hiding away the mistakes etc.) when they feel vulnerable.

In order to make the story more appealing for the readers, romance novels set up a male protagonist who most females yearn to fall in love with; in *WGM*’s case, they invite celebrities on the show to satisfy that aspect. Radway (1984) explains that “[readers] prefer to see the heroine desired, needed, and loved by a man who is strong and masculine, but equally capable

of unusual tenderness, gentleness, and concern for her pleasure” (81). Obviously, the male character that is described by Radway is too perfect for anyone to embody in reality. However, *WGM* tries to achieve this by inviting popular male celebrities on the show. They are probably the closest it can get to a fictional character since a celebrity’s role is to showcase their attractiveness and be desirable in their fans’ eyes. In addition to the male character, making the correct female casting is equally central to the dynamic in *WGM*. The show attempts to select female celebrities that represent a wide spectrum of personalities – from young and innocent 20 year olds, edgy and fierce women, quiet and elegant ladies, and mature and frank 30 years olds etc. It is encouraging to see that women in *WGM* need not to fit the exact mode of “male-identified hero” or the most competent housewife in order to be liked.⁶⁰ Since the show is geared towards a younger fan base (30s and under), there is a lack of representation from the older generations, which is a common phenomenon in global media. However, this is also because the average age for first marriage in Korea is 28.9 for women and 31.8 for men (Chosunilbo 2011), and viewers might find it harder to identify with 40 and 50 years old participants who are looking for love. Moreover, the ultimate goal of *WGM* is to demonstrate that the those in the couples care for and have feelings towards each other.

Other than providing a realistic character, romance novels have to create romantic situations that readers can imagine themselves taking part in. This can be achieved through setting up certain scenes: “[readers] expect and, indeed, rely upon certain events, characters, and progressions to provide the desired experience” (Radway 1984:63). In *WGM*, typical actions done between lovers like holding hands, hugging and caressing are all considered huge milestones for the pairs. The show features these “first” moments by editing the scene and

⁶⁰ Having said that, it is not to say that the Korean audience do not prefer a certain types of imaginary wife. Female celebrities who can cook well, know how to tend to older people/in-laws, or share other “wifely virtues” usually get more praise from the Korean public. This is a demonstration of male gaze in play.

adding romantic soundtracks to them. These signature “progressions” can easily provoke viewers to (re)experience the sweet and bashful feelings that accompany first falling in love. Besides, the show sends the couples to complete missions that are similar to dates that people go on – going to a movie together, going ice-skating, going to a theme park etc. These are all events that can provide desired experiences for the viewers. Furthermore, Radway (1984) argues that the chronicle of the romance should not “merely be events of a courtship but *what it feels like* to be the *object* of one” (64). WGM exemplifies that feeling by encouraging its participants to initiate dates that they consider to be meaningful. This includes surprise events that a spouse wants to throw for his or her other half. While organizing such an event, one must cater towards the partner and think of the partner as his/her object of love. Viewers of *WGM* appreciate the sincerity of the event planner and enjoy witnessing the lucky one being cherished by his/her lover. Sometimes, a special event leads to a creation of something that can be purchased by the public. *WGM* couples often collaborate to produce songs (usually about their relationship or inspired by it), perform together during concerts and appear in music videos together. These products (the music track, music video etc.) serve as a permanent materialization of the “desired experience” viewers are looking for.

There are two major reasons why people watch *WGM*: they watch it to imagine being in a relationship with the celebrity they like, and/or they watch it because they want to experience the emotions that are portrayed or invoked on the show. Whenever a new couple is featured in the show, there are always fans who comment, “Stay away from my [insert celebrity name]” or “I am so jealous of the spouse of [insert celebrity name].” There are fans who feel uncomfortable watching their favorite star starting a relationship with another person, but there are also many who try to live vicariously through the spouse. *WGM* provides fans a position to

fantasize about dating and falling in love with their star. The show purposefully presents romantic moments between the couples with minimal distractions and side stories. Thus, viewers can easily substitute themselves as the participant who is paired up with their favorite idol, and imagine themselves in the participant's shoes. *WGM* simply provide its viewers a space in which to visualize falling in love with an attractive person. As Radway explains, reading romance novels provides “psychological gratification for the needs [women] experienced because they had adopted that role” (Radway 1984:481). Some watch *WGM* to fulfill the lack: they want to feel needed and desired by someone. For single viewers, they can fill the vacancy of their love lives by experiencing the nervousness of meeting up with a person they like, the anger of getting into a fight with a loved one, and the heartache one experiences when breaking up with someone. Some watch *WGM* to convince themselves that one day, they will find a spouse who is as perfect as the one on the show, even though the viewers are flawed and incomplete (supposedly like the heroine). Having said that, there are also fans who watch the show for reasons other than those listed above. While Radway's analysis of how women take pleasure in reading/viewing romance works holds true, the work is dated and it does not encompass some of the newer ways of how people think of romance and courtship. For example, foreign viewers might have a harder time identifying with the protagonists due to cultural differences. Next, we will look at how international fans consume *We Got Married*.

(ii) How International Fans Consume *We Got Married*

International fans find *WGM* distinctive because it promotes Korean style marriage to its viewers worldwide. Yoshitaka Mori's essay “*Winter Sonata* and Cultural Practices of Active Fans in Japan: Considering Middle-Aged Women as Cultural Agents” can further demonstrate how *WGM* serves as a space for understanding Korean culture. Mori studies the consumption of

Winter Sonata (2003), one of the most popular Korean dramas of all time, in Japan, specifically because the drama is predominantly watched by middle-aged women. The phenomenon is especially interesting since Japanese and Korea only restarted their cultural exchange in 2002, and no one expected a foreign drama to do better than any Japanese drama. Mori tries to understand why these middle-aged housewives are so attached to the show and how they consume the show. Fans explain that they are people who can be “crazy with a pure, romantic story even [though?] they are middle-aged” (Mori 2008:136). Other than the aspect of pure love, fans enjoy the drama because the viewers are “learning about Korean culture while enjoying the drama” (Mori 2008:135); fans would even go on the Internet to research Korean culture. Most importantly, Mori (2008) points out that these fans are not passively consuming the drama, they are actively (re)producing a new understanding of the show and culture: “[viewers] associate the story of *Winter Sonata* with other Korean stories, culture, history and even their personal experiences and memories by reading and watching other media” (135).

Similarly, viewers (especially international viewers) are able to (re)construct new understandings of love within Korea and beyond through *WGM*. As mentioned before, *WGM* delivers a rather innocent account of love compared to many of today’s highly sexualized media portrayals. The show delivers a chance for audiences to re-experience and fantasize about the pure love of the past. A lot of fans create fan sites, making music videos and even writing fan fiction to continue the fantasy that they started believing in. The production team also added a new discussion board to their website where fans can submit ideas for new missions that the couples should do. This opens up a new possibility where not only the producers and the couples participate in defining love and marriage, but fans from the whole world get to be a part of the movement. Moreover, love and marriage is a very universal subject that can be

understood across nations. Compared to culturally specific shows like talk shows, comedy shows and quiz shows, *WGM* is easier to digest for international fans. People who do not know much about Korea can still comprehend the interactions between the couples and the emotions they are going through. Furthermore, the show often introduces Korean culture (on top of marriage rituals) and geography to its audience through events like traveling to certain locations in Korea and visiting one's in-laws for the first time. Viewers can easily associate their own experience with what is happening on *WGM*. This remains one of the reasons why *WGM* has such an international fan base.

Furthermore, *WGM* spin-offs demonstrate the process through which international celebrities assimilate to Korean culture, leaving room for fans to imagine dating a Korean or living in Korea. In 2012, *WGM* decided to film a one-episode spin-off that featured two pair of interethnic couples by pairing a Chinese celebrity with a Korean celebrity. The Chinese edition was well-received by fans. In 2013, *WGM* decided to make the first season of *WGM* Global Edition, pairing two Chinese, Taiwanese or Japanese celebrities with two Korean celebrities. The season had 15 episodes in total. Due to its popularity, a second season was slated to air in April 2014; this season would also feature two pairs of interethnic couples. Although some participants are not from Korea, the format of the show has remained identical to the Korean version. Months of filming are completed within South Korea before the show airs. Moreover, all four pairs include a Korean groom and a non-Korean bride. This is more than a coincidence for me, given Korea's history of using comfort women, which I mentioned in Chapter Three. Looking at it from a historical perspective, arranging for a Korean female celebrity to marry a foreign male celebrity evokes the sending of Korean women to service Japanese soldiers that occurred during the occupation period. The act perhaps suggests the emasculation of the Korean

nation. On the flip side, having foreign brides marrying Korean men signifies the strength and appeal of the Korean nation.

In addition, selecting only Korean grooms creates a space of fantasy for the show's large international female fan base. In the Korean edition of *WGM*, it is harder for international fans to relate to and identify with local Koreans due to possible cultural differences. Foreigners are rarely mentioned or represented within Korean variety shows and are often misrepresented as well. In the Global Edition, foreign fans have an easier time understanding what foreign brides are going through (culture shock, language barrier, etc.) as they have been through the same while assimilating into K-Pop fandoms. For international fans who fantasize about dating or marrying their favorite Korean idol, the show demonstrates the difficulties of transnational relationships. The Global Edition manages to create the ideal foreign brides for female international fans to identify with.

In *WGM*, the four non-Korean brides are essentially married into a Korean household. Throughout the show, the wives make efforts to familiarize themselves with Korea's culture and language. The female celebrities report that they prepare for the show by learning basic Korean. In fact, Japanese actress Fujii Mina, who participated in season one, is proficient in Korean. Of course, the wives are shown to assimilate quickly. The non-Koreans also get chances to showcase themselves and interact with the public. Last season, both couples ended up recording their respective love songs in Korean. Season two's participant husband Key (member of SHINee) and wife Arisa Yagi (model from Japan) have been invited to walk the runway for Seoul Fashion Week 2014. At the same time, there are also instances when cultural exchange happens and the show portrays these incidents from a Korean's perspective. I have noticed that a lot of the foreign artifacts or moments of misunderstanding are turned into comedic incidents.

For example, when Emma Wu (Taiwanese actress) explained that, in Taiwan, saying “Cheers!” is an invitation to down a drink in one go, it led to a hilarious scene in which Taecyeon (2PM member) was forced to chug a whole cup of hot chocolate in panic (GWGM Season 1 Episode 1). Similarly, when Wu added some fermented Taiwanese condiments to a dish of fried rice, Taecyeon immediately showed a nauseated look on his face (GWGM Season 1 Episode 3). Ultimately, these international editions provide the perfect template for international fans to imagine having an inter-racial relationship with a Korean other half. It also reinforces the concept of confluent love as viewers witness the hard work couples put in to learn about and accept each other’s cultural differences.

By expanding *WGM* globally through the Global Edition and Chinese version, the show also commodifies Korean entertainment strategies by selling its copyright. Since *WGM* is popular internationally, MBC began doing spin-offs so that international broadcasting companies would be more willing to buy them. The Chinese edition is broadcasted through Shanghai Media Group whereas the Global Edition is aired through YouTube and STAR Chinese Channel (available in Taiwan, Singapore, Vietnam and Philippines). Thanks to Hallyu fever in China, Korean broadcasting channels began selling television show copyrights to China. In fact, many of the most popular reality shows in China are remakes of successful Korean reality shows.⁶¹ Although Japan also exports cultural goods, Chinese consumers prefer Korea to Japan due to historical reasons. As the director of *Superstar China* explains, “A number of Korean dramas and entertainment programs have been embraced in China because they don’t conflict with Chinese culture and values.”⁶² Furthermore, the *WGM* Chinese version

⁶¹ http://www.koreatimes.co.kr/www/news/culture/2013/12/386_148109.html

⁶² <http://www.scmp.com/news/china-insider/article/1344467/chinas-most-popular-reality-shows-come-south-korea>

is produced to commemorate the 20-year diplomatic relationship between South Korea and China⁶³, showing that entertainment can play a role in politics.

In conclusion, the variety show *We Got Married* portrays Korean marriage rituals in a more individualized and unconventional way in order to cope with the missing family aspect within the show. In addition, the show promotes the concept that effort is needed in order to maintain a relationship between two people. Lastly, viewers can vicariously experience falling in love and imagine being loved through the participants in *WGM*; moreover, it serves as a place for fans worldwide to actively participate in the meaning-making process of marriage. This is why *WGM* holds such a special place within the variety world. I hope the show will continue to cast new couples and create new missions that change up how we think about marriage and love.

⁶³http://asiapacificarts.usc.edu/w_apapa/showarticle.aspx?articleID=17939&AspxAutoDetectCookieSupport=1

Chapter 5

“The fandom is powerful, the fandom is real”: The Experience of International Fandom of K-Pop

I. Attending M! Countdown

June, 2013. It all started when I was in my second hour of searching “ways to go to live music shows in Korea⁶⁴.” On the eighth blog I visited, I decided to scroll down to the comments section and see if I could dig out more information regarding how to get to M!Countdown⁶⁵’s live recording two Thursdays from then. Right there, I came across a user named “Jojo” who said that she was planning to go to M!Countdown the exact same day as I was! Unable to conceal my excitement, I immediately left a comment below hers, indicating my fervent wish to line up for the recording with her, totally ignoring that he/she might be a faceless stranger who is sitting behind the computer screen. Thankfully, the Singaporean emailed me within hours, indicating that she had been contacting other K-Pop fans to ask for tips regarding how to attend the live recording⁶⁶. After exchanging some conversation and our contact information, I quietly waited for the day to come.

⁶⁴ Want to know what I learnt after attending three music shows? Check out my blog post at <http://yvonnilla.tumblr.com/post/62159074213/things-i-wish-i-knew-before-attending-kpop-music-shows>.

⁶⁵ M!Countdown by M.Net broadcasting station is one of the five weekly music television program in South Korea. The others are Music Bank by KBS, Inkigayo by SBS, Show Champion by KST and Show! Music Core by MBC.

⁶⁶ To give an overview of the process, every Korean music television show has two parts to it: a pre-recording session where idols pre-record their performance, and a live-recording session where idols perform live on stage. Those who cannot attend the live session must attend the pre-recording, but there are also idols who show up to both pre-recording and live-recording. Usually, a fan gets into a pre-recording by signing their name on a secret list or sign that is created by the important members of the respective idol’s fan club. To get on the list, one has to find the sign, take a picture with the sign, and text or message the person (cell phone number) listed on the sign. Then, the person will assign you your rank in line. (For example, number 10 indicates you are the tenth person in line) In addition, there are required items (like the newest album, cellphone ringtone, fan club glow stick etc.) that differentiate fans into “tiers.” Those who have all the required items listed by the fan club will be in the top tier and can get in earlier. As for the live recording, usually the first 20 people in line for each idol or group will be able to get in, depending on number of groups recording that day and the size of the recording studio. M!Countdown is the only show that allows fans who are not associated with any fan club to get in by lining up. The process is similar in that one has to get on the “secret list” organized by experienced fans.

June 19th, Wednesday 6 pm. I decided to go to the CJ E&M Center Studio in Mapo-gu, a 45 minutes subway ride from my hostel, to check out the location and look for the “mysterious list.” Contrary to my expectation, the plaza was extremely quiet; no screaming fans sitting outside of the building. How was I supposed to find a piece of paper in a commercial building complex? Scavenger hunting is not my strength. I managed to find two middle school students who are EXO fans and used my (broken) Korean to ask if they knew where I should sign up for the show. They told me to simply come really early tomorrow morning to line up. So I returned to my hostel, hoping that I could figure something out by tomorrow morning.

Wednesday 9pm. I suddenly received an email from Jojo. She revealed that when she went to the studio at 5pm, she found the person handling the “mysterious list” and signed up. The first roll call was at 11pm that evening. I started panicking. Should I trek all the way there in the middle of the night? All by myself?

Wednesday 10pm, Kaokao Talk chat content:

Y: So you are going at 11?

J: I’m on my way there

Y: Where do you live?

J: Anguk. You?

Y: Myongdong. Are you going by yourself?

J: Nope, I am with my sister and a friend.

Y: Okay. Alright. I am risking my life to go. 0.0
I just left my place.

J: Okay. I don’t know if it is very
dangerous or not...

So I embarked on my journey back to the CJ E&M Studio, with the goal of securing a spot on the list. When I arrived at 10:50pm there was already a crowd of 20 or so people. Following the directions given by Jojo, I rushed towards the location of the mysterious list for Henry (Super Junior member who was promoting at the time), took a picture with the post and sent it to the number listed on the paper. With the help of other fans, I located the person in

charge of the mysterious list for the general admission line as well. 이름? (Name?) 이.본. (Y-vonne) 뭐라고? (Eh?) 오... 진.의.혼 (Chan-Yi-Yan) 여기 기다려. (Wait here.)

Seeing my name scribbled on the list under 32 made me feel a bit more at ease. The organizer eventually lined us up and did a roll call, crossing off the names of those who did not show up by 11pm on the dot. She then announced that we should be back at this location at 5:30am tomorrow morning. Oh lord. My way back to the hotel was not easy. Since the subway shuts down at 12:30am, I only managed to go halfway by subway and had to run out of a random station at 12:30pm to catch a taxi back to my hostel. This is the first time I understand the phrase “things you do as a K-Pop fan”...

June 20th, Thursday, 4am. Barely awake, I put on the clothes I laid out last night, double checked that Henry’s newest album “Trap” was inside my backpack and headed out into the silent streets of Myongdong, a total opposite to the buzzing scene in the day. Since the subway doesn’t start service until 5am, I had to spend an extra ₩10,000 (about US\$10) to take a taxi there. CJ E&M 센터에 가세요. (Please go to CJ E&M Center.)

Thursday 9:30am. We had squatted, stood, sat at the same spot since 5am. Jojo, Julie, Meredith and I had talked about whatever K-Pop related topic we could think of. We had finished up most of the snacks we bought from the 7-11 convenience store around the corner. We were already tired and grumpy. Suddenly, the organizers in the front of the line stood up. *Finally*. An official from the M!Net television station came out to check us



Image 5-30. Fans lining up for music show

off from the list. At this point in time, there are at least 100 people in line. We saw tourists who came directly from the airport with their luggage. We saw students in school uniforms. “Phew. Today it’s the woman officer. She usually lets in about 30 people. If it were the guy, he would only let in 20!” an experienced fan exclaimed. At that point, my number is 29. I am hoping that



Image 5-31. CD required for entering

I will make it past the cut-off. After all, I came all the way from Hong Kong to watch this show!

Thursday 11am. We were waiting to confirm our spot at Henry’s pre-recording. With my CD in my left hand, I eagerly held my right arm out, ready for the S.M. Entertainment representative to mark my wrist with her black felt-tip marker. “H1-9” It reads Henry Group 1 #9. Yes! I made it!

Thursday 2pm. The recording studio was much smaller than it looked on TV. The fan club leader reminded us of the fan chant one last time. The security guards reminded us, again and again, that photography and video recording were *absolutely prohibited*. “OPPAAAAAA!!!” Henry finally walked out from the side entrance in a baggy top with skulls and butterflies, a pair of wide black shorts, black and white knee-high socks and a cap with a silver crown decoration. He looked so much thinner and paler in person. “안녕하세요” (*Hello!*) Henry greeted with his cute voice, “안녕하세요!!!” Everyone screamed back in unison. He asked us how’s everyone doing, everyone smiled sheepishly at him. “멋있어요!” (*You’re handsome!*) a fan added. He asked, “Do you want to hear me play?” Everyone screamed “네!!!!” (*yes!!!*) “헨리 잘해요!” (*Henry you’re doing great!*) “Henry, I love you!” “FIGHTINGGGG!” “我爱你!” (*I love you in*

Chinese)... When the actual recording started, every fan inside the studio was yelling, screeching, and chanting on the top of their lungs. You would have never imagined sounds like these could come out our tiny bodies⁶⁷.

Thursday, 5pm. We were *finally* lining up for the actual live recording. Luckily, I was the second to the last person to make it in through the general line. There was a lot of waiting in line, slowly walking up the staircase, sitting on the staircase, and eventually walking into the studio once again. This time, the studio was packed with fans of all the idols and groups that were performing that day. Fans were screaming for their favorite idols and waving the light sticks and other exclusive merchandise. That was the moment that made all those hours of waiting worthwhile.

Thursday, 7:30pm. It was all over. That marked the end of my 17-hour day as a die-hard K-Pop fan. If I had to sum it up, it would be one: the waiting was endless and two: I could not have done it without the help of other fans. Without the tips from my new friend Jojo, I would not have made it into the pre-recording or the live show. The experience encourages fans to bond with each other, especially with the long hours of waiting and the frequent travel.

I realized, however, that there is an obvious hierarchy within the fan clubs/fandom. Those who know the secrets as to how and when to start up the “mysterious list” refused to relinquish their power and control easily. From the information I gathered, simply the first person who arrives at the location and posts up the sign can control the list. He or she has to have a Korean cellphone number and know how to speak Korean because the entertainment company officials will contact him or her directly. Usually, longtime fans or executive members from each fan club control the list and no one else dares to challenge the system. Thus, international fans without working Korean cellphones or fluent Korean are usually at the

⁶⁷ For the recording of the day I attended, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=caw52gFTUU>

bottom of the hierarchy. The whole experience was not foreigner-friendly. If you do not know Korean, it is extremely hard to gather crucial information such as what is happening, what time one should be back at what location for roll call, what merchandise is required to get in. Having said that, we continue to see a huge influx of international fans attempting (with occasional success) to attend music shows in Korea. In fact, the Korean Tourism Organization regularly gives out free tickets to international visitors in Korea as long as one has proof of plane tickets and passport. Thanks to the Internet, I was able to meet three new friends (and fans) and embark on this amazing journey with them.

Thursday 10pm, Kaokao talk chat content:

Y: Whoops! I am sorry that I didn't see your message until now! Yes I did! :) Thanks for everything gift. 99% was your work!!! Can't be more grateful to have gone with you three!!!

Y: No problem!!! If you guys are coming to Myongdong, let's grab a meal and take mad load of pictures with cardboard celebrities! :3 Have a good night of rest! I bet all of us will have the sweetest dreams!

J: Hi. Had your dinner [and] reached home safely?

J: Haha. Thanks to you too! Your knowledge of Korean language helped us all a lot! Keep in contact! Maybe when I go to Hong Kong in a few years time I can find you! Likewise if you come to Singapore in the future just let me know! ((:

J: Yea! good night and dream of Henry and EXO!

The experience of attending music shows as an international fan forced me to reflect upon the role international fans play in the K-Pop world. Are we simply consumers who are blindly obsessed with a culture? Can we actually make a difference? Does K-Pop need us? And do we need K-Pop?

II. Fan Culture and Branding

Fan, abbreviated from “fanatic,” tends to carry negative connotations in people’s minds. Many have the perception that fans are foolish people who spend way too much money and time on unworthy people and it doesn’t really take much intelligence to be a fan. However, I find that contradictory to my experience as a K-Pop fan. While I do not directly interfere with entertainment companies’ music production, I do not feel like a powerless consumer. I am not uncritical of what I see in K-Pop and there are outlets for me to express my opinions. Meeting K-Pop fans in person during this summer further solidified my belief that K-Pop can bind together people who share nothing in common, and that power itself is meaningful. In “The Popularity of Individualism,” author Roald Maliangkay quotes Kee-hyeung Lee on the importance of popular entertainment to the younger generations in Korea: “Nowhere was the power of youth more visible than [in] the popular entertainment sector, especially popular music, literature, film and advertising. To them cultural consumption was a form of production and an expression of their identities” (306). Thus, being a fan of K-Pop is not simply about consuming Korean music. By taking a stance and saying, “I am a K-Pop fan,” one defines one’s identity and is “actively involved in creating and consuming the ideas and symbols related to popular culture” (306). In this chapter, I will discuss how fans express their identity through K-Pop and create meaning through forming fan clubs and dance groups.

This form of expressing identity also calls to mind another form of commercial expression – branding⁶⁸. Brand management in the contemporary advertising world involves creating and maintaining an identity for its customers to identify with. Brands with successful advertising campaigns like Coca-Cola, Apple, Nike, MasterCard, and Geico. all have very well-defined identities - branding. It is important to note that branding is not one-directional – while

⁶⁸ For more details and definition on branding, read the article from Advertising Educational Foundation at http://www.aef.com/on_campus/classroom/speaker_pres/data/3000.

a company can shape their brand a certain way, they cannot control how the customers are going to react to the advertising campaign. Every customer experience contributes to the brand name as a whole. Founder and C.E.O of CoreBrand James R. Gregory once said, “A brand can best be described as the sum total of all human experiences, perceptions and feelings about a particular thing, product or organization. Brands exist in the consciousness—of individuals and of the public” (O’Barr).

In fact, branding happens in many levels within K-Pop, from the entertainment companies to the individual fans themselves. In the first chapter, I demonstrated how the “Big Three” entertainment companies managed to create their own branding through their groups and their music styles. K-Pop fans identify S.M. Entertainment through their visually-addictive music videos, YG through their refreshing pop-rock music, JYP through their catchy dance moves. The same goes for the individual groups within each company. The ones that are popular often have a very clear image – innocent, sexy, chic, quirky etc. However, like branding, fan participation and perception makes up a large part of K-Pop. Entertainment companies can produce a certain image for their groups, but the fans ultimately decide how they feel about the celebrities and their work. Fans choose their favorites through not just the music but also the impressions they get from each group. In addition, how fans act often reflects positively or negatively on their respective idols. They also contribute to the branding of their idols. Each fandom has its own type of branding. While the entertainment company can sway it, the fans



Image 5-3. Illustration of different fandoms by fan (source: xxxblack.tumblr.com)

largely maintain their fandom image. While it is hard to characterize each fandom accurately, there are definitive cultures within them⁶⁹. In “Building Communities Online,” Melanie Formentin explains that one of “the most notable characteristic [of virtual communities] is that participants develop a sense of membership” (174). Since K-Pop fandom is primarily organized online, the statement applies to fandoms as well. By joining different fan club forums, one can tell that each forum has its unique culture. Some are very adamant that users be polite and refrain from swearing, some encourage participation by restricting lower levels users’ access to certain chat boards, some forums promote citing sources, and some are very lax. These rules determine the type of fans/users who will remain in the forum and thus attract a community of people with similar values. Cultures within virtual communities can be translated into real life as well. When I was in line for the music show recording, I witnessed how different fan clubs function. Groups with more adult fans have clearer hierarchy and job distributions. Club members were better at following the directions given by the club president. According to other fans, groups with younger fans tend to be more chaotic. They face more problems with fans cutting the line or sneaking in cameras without permission.

Most importantly, each fan can contribute to the K-Pop branding directly through as little as listening to a new song and publishing a review of the CD on a blog. Every “human experience” and “perceptions” ultimately contributes to how K-Pop, or a particular company, group, or fandom is perceived by others. Lastly, being a K-Pop fan contributes to one’s personal brand. By identifying as a fan, one is taking on a certain preconceived identity, adding to or subtracting from the K-Pop fan stereotype.

⁶⁹ I do not claim to be neutral in describing different fandoms. I am a fan of certain K-Pop groups. But there are always rumors and generalization of different fandoms. Certain fandoms are known as extremely protective of their celebrities, certain ones are known for being unorganized and hard to control, some are known for being mature. I do not want to point out names because it will be bias. If you are interested in what some netizens think of different fandoms, see <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20110904023255AAmvelh>.

III. Our “Guilty Pleasure”

I first noticed Bea this summer when she danced Girls’ Generation’s “I Got A Boy” routine during a school field trip. A 5’6’’ pale skinned college sophomore with long curly red hair, she was not afraid to tell and show others how much she loves K-Pop. Ironically, she is also the same girl who calls K-Pop her “guilty pleasure” because K-Pop, while all golden and magical in its fans’ eyes, always seem weird and absurd from a non-fans’ point of view:

“People who don’t understand K-Pop, just won’t understand it. They always ask, ‘Why are you listening to foreign music?’” People are averse to it. Actually, when I first heard Lollipop, I also found it pretty weird. But then later I was intrigued by it. I would have never imagined myself becoming a K-Pop fan today.”

In fact, many other subjects share similar views. Another individual, Tim, describes K-Pop as “a part of my life that I have never been able to talk to other people about” (other than to other K-Pop fans). This is because following K-Pop is often a transformative experience, where fans devote a lot of time to learn the language, the culture, the insider’s lingo etc. And K-Pop fans are proud of it. Yet, K-Pop is still not a widely accepted element to define oneself in the West. Imagine how many times you have heard people introduce themselves as “an ardent K-Pop fan” versus “a crazy Harry Potter fan” or “a musical fanatic” or “a die-hard [insert sports team] fan.” This is probably because United States has the biggest “ethnicity industry” (Comaroff 2009:16) in the world – Hollywood. On top of that, there are multiple other “ethnicity industries” that are popular within the US, like African-American specific entertainment industries (including music, TV shows and movies) and subcultures like Gothic and Hipster. K-Pop is still a relatively new subculture within US so it is no surprise that people have misconceptions of K-Pop fans.

Most of the time, K-Pop fans are “in the closet” because other people don’t seem to understand their excitement and passion. It is not hard to find malicious comments online

regarding K-Pop fans; many consider them as “crazy,” “stupid,” “annoying,” and “ignorant”⁷⁰.

Interview subjects have complained that many of their friends either don’t understand their obsession or are uninterested in K-Pop. It leaves them feeling lonely since they do not have any one with whom to share their excitement.

But because it is our guilty pleasure, K-Pop can immediately bond two random strangers together. It is as if by revealing that they are K-Pop fans, those two people have opened their hearts and shared their darkest secret with each other. How K-Pop connects people was one of the most heated topics during my group interview. Tim describes the excitement when two “closeted” K-Pop fans meet for the first time:

“I’d meet people and I’d be like kind of friendly with them and then suddenly somehow we would find out that we both like K-Pop. And then suddenly it turns into ‘Oh my god, we’re best friends!!!’... It is such like a bond, especially in America, where [K-Pop] is still sort of a minority group, people that like K-Pop, so when you find someone else who [is] also as obsessed as you are, you’re just like ‘Oh my god, let’s be friends!’

All my interviewees have one (or more) go-to person with whom to discuss and share their K-Pop enthusiasm. David explains that there are certain friends with whom he doesn’t really talk about anything but K-Pop. But he continues to keep in touch with them because they are always willing to be excited and talk about Kpop. What if there isn’t a friend you can confide in? My participants answer, “You convert [your friends]!”

⁷⁰ This is a very complicated topic that is pretty subjective. K-Pop fandoms acquired the reputation they have today because of many incidents that happened in the real world and on the Internet. Since K-Pop fans largely consist of teenagers and young adults, this naturally increases the likelihood of fans doing immature, impolite, and inappropriate things. More often than not, the mistakes K-Pop fans make spread through social networks rapidly (including videos and photos of impolite behaviors, blog posts with immature comments etc.). Also, many of these fans are still students, so they have more time to spend on K-Pop related events (like dominating online polls by voting multiple times each day), creating the reputation of K-Pop fans spending every single minute of the day increasing their idols’ video view count, voting for their idols and so on. It is important to remember that a lot of K-Pop fans are not like that. Also, my subjects’ demographic is also not like that. Unlike many fans who are teenagers or middle-schoolers, my subjects are either college students or graduates. My subjects also self-report that they have been keeping up with K-Pop less since entering college due to time constraints. A blog that collects K-Pop fans ill-doings: <http://wtfkpopfandom.tumblr.com/>
Here are some anti-Kpop fans links: <http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120329172053AAes2Bh>,
<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20120724155032AAX1gm4>,

Many interviewees say that there are certain people who are more likely to enjoy K-Pop. People who are into Japanese Anime or Japanese culture are often potential converts; people who enjoy or have a background in singing, dancing and musical theatre are also a good match. As Tim explains, people with performing arts backgrounds “appreciate all the things [K-Pop idols] are able to do” on stage. Often times, live performance videos “convert” performing arts lovers into K-Pop fans in no time. Actually, there seem to be a widely accepted repertoire of music videos that K-Pop fans usually show to their potential converts. If you’re expecting me to say PSY’s “Gangnam Style” or “Gentleman” then you are doing it wrong. While PSY is internationally recognized, he is not the prototype. Bigbang’s “Haru Haru” and “Fantastic Baby,” SHINee’s “Hello” and “Ring Ding Dong,” Girls’ Generation’s “Gee” and “Genie,” 2NE1’s “I’m the Best,” Hyuna’s “Bubble Bop” (this one is debatable), Ailee’s “Heaven,” and the list can go on and on⁷¹. Of course, it is extremely important to cater to your convert’s taste of music.

There is no doubt that K-Pop was made popular largely because of the Internet movement. The online K-Pop community is extremely vigorous. It is the haven for all K-Pop fans (“closeted” or not) by providing many portals for fans worldwide to connect and discuss their favorite idols. According to my subjects, the most popular international K-Pop informational sites include www.allkpop.com/, omonatheydidnt.livejournal.com/, www.seoulbeats.com/, www.kpopstarz.com. These English language sites provide timely updates of everything that is happening in the K-Pop world. Consider them the New York Times and Washington Post of K-Pop. While some of those sites have forums, www.soompi.com/ is one of the biggest K-Pop related forums for international fans. Other than

⁷¹ Here is a link for more suggestions: <http://www.buzzfeed.com/marisol/best-songs-to-introduce-to-your-non-kpop-friends-b0w2>

that, many fans follow various Tumblr accounts by reblogging photos, GIFs and videos of their favorite celebrities. Besides, Facebook pages and Twitter accounts always serve as a convenient and quick way to receive updates regarding a celebrity. Last but not least, there are official and unofficial⁷² fan clubs for idol groups and individual idols. These fan clubs always require membership registration, indicating a larger commitment to that celebrity. Often times, fan clubs are the ones that organize large-scale fan-related events (fan meetings, birthday surprises/projects, disaster relief donations, mass album ordering, making idol-specific merchandises etc). Some of the biggest unofficial fan clubs and forums have over 280,000 members⁷³.

IV. Case Study: K-Pop Cover Dance Groups

As mentioned above, being a K-Pop fan does not have to be a passive process. Indeed, K-Pop often invites its fans to become active meaning-makers within the culture. Since it is often difficult to find a large number of K-Pop fans readily within a limited area (given that we are referring to international fans), many fans actively participate in the online communities. There are countless ways to contribute online – translating interviews and videos from Korean to another language, drawing fan-art (at times to satisfy one's fantasy about certain members), writing drama and film reviews or recaps, and making singing-covers and dance-covers. As Yoshitaka Mori says of the Winter Sonta fans: “We should see the fans as performers, not merely as consumers. While they are fans, they also perform as fans, acting as fans.” (137).

Bea had the experience of participating in the Brazil K-Pop scene, which eventually inspired her to start the K-Pop movement in Miami, US. She studied abroad in Brazil in 2010, which is when she first became aware of K-Pop. Since the late 2000s, there has been a rapidly

⁷² Official fan clubs refer to ones that are created and monitored by the entertainment company. Unofficial fan clubs are purely run by fans, not the entertainment company.

⁷³ For example SNSD's <http://www.soshified.com/forums/>

growing following for K-Pop in South America. As Huffington Post describes it, K-Pop groups are getting more popular than Western big names like Justin Bieber, Lady Gaga and Demi Lovato (Briceno 2013). In Lima, Peru, there are malls where an entire floor is dedicated to selling South Korean-related music, clothes and food. Moreover, hundreds of fans gather in downtown parks in Peru each week to share their passion for Korean pop culture. Some even dress up as Korean and Japanese comic characters to attend such gatherings (Briceno 2013). Therefore, it is not a surprise that Korean singers are now seeing South America as “a priority on their touring” (Trivedi 2013) – groups like BIGBANG, Super Junior, TVXQ, Infinite, 4Minute, B2ST, C.N.Blue and NU’EST had concerts in Mexico, Chile, Peru and Brazil with high attendance.

According to Bea, there was a huge celebration of K-Pop culture in São Paulo. She watched many dance crews performing and competing in dance contests, K-Pop singing contests and many other Korean cultural events. According to her there is a large Korean population in São Paulo who first hosted these events. The Brazilians then caught on and began joining the K-Pop movement. *The Times* points out that perhaps the Confucian values of modesty and restraint appeal to the Central and South Americans who are going through economic and political challenges. The positive and bubbly energy from K-Pop also helps provide a fresh alternative to the comparatively depressing Western rock, indie and emo music that the older generations listen to (Trivedi 2013). “In Chile, we don’t have anything like K-Pop. Songs here generally have political and social relics, though we have Latin rhythm,” a young woman from Santiago explains.

In addition, Bea believes that Brazilians’ passion for dancing definitely overlaps with K-Pop’s emphasis on dance. She adds, “In Brazil, when you’re into something, you just devote a

lot of energy and time into it... there is definitely a less of this embarrassment in dancing and singing in Brazil (when compared to US).” In fact, the outward embracing of K-Pop culture in Brazil is what inspired Bea to start her dance group and K-Pop fan group on Facebook.

I then asked Bea to share more about her experience in the dance group, why she wanted to start such a group, and why they choose to cover K-Pop dancing.

“I first started liking Korean pop dances the most and got attracted to it. I like that they are not so sexual and their dance are more powerful. When I went to Brazil, I found so many K-Pop fans dancing. So when I started the Facebook page for the Miami community and I found a few people who are also interested in dancing. So we formed GPK. We used to only perform at Anime conventions, but the past two years we have been to dance meets also. I am really happy that we inspired other people to make their own dance groups and now there are four or five K-Pop dance groups in South Florida. The trend just sort of spiraled on.”

A lot of K-Pop fans first become interested in the genre because of the heavy focus on choreography and dancing. YouTube provided the K-Pop fan community with a place to showcase and share their passion for dancing through making covers of the dances. Sometimes, K-Pop itself is enough to encourage people who have never danced before to join a dance group.

My other participant Peter is also in a K-Pop dance group. Peter admits that members in the group joined partly because they are mesmerized by what the idols are capable of and want to imitate the idols.

“When you look at [the idols] perform, you think, ‘Wow, they look really cool.’ And that’s the first thing you think of. So you kind of want to do that. We can do that too, we want to do that too. We want to look cool like them on stage. That’s part of the idea, I think.”
Peter

To many fans, idols represent the mirror image that many want to imitate. One of the ways of shortening the gap is by learning the same skill set they have, in this case, mastering a dance an idol does. When asked about how they pick dances, Peter explains that they pick dances that

look better as a group rather than individually. In addition, the popularity of a certain song and choreography definitely matters. Most importantly, they pick their dances as a group, and usually the popular songs end up being the ones that most members want to dance to. They also want to pick popular songs so that they can connect with the audience more.

Nonetheless, Peter repeatedly emphasized that the group not only provides the members with a place to express their love for K-Pop and dancing, but it provides a social aspect: “I think the social aspect plays a bigger role. Because [members] want to get together to [hang out and drink]...” He mentions that most members in the group have little or no dance experience, but it fulfills the need for those who are interested in K-Pop dancing. They simply “all like dancing, all together, as a group.” It is not so much the act of dancing that they are longing for, but the “together[ness]” – picking the routine together, learning the routine, and performing in one entity. Thus, dance groups not only fulfill the fan’s desire to perform like a K-Pop star, they also act as social networks where people with similar interests can meet and spend time with each other.

In retrospect, K-Pop fans are not building virtual communities to simply support an idol or a group, but are finding ways to feel connected and recognized for who they are. By meeting other K-Pop lovers, fans are able to make sense of their identities and confirm that there are many others who are equally passionate about the subject. They feel included and welcomed within the K-Pop communities and empowered when they feel they are making a real difference. Many fans, and especially the younger generations today, experience a lack of connection, integration, and even sense of identity. This has been attributed to the increasing use of technology and the trend of turning face-to-face encounters into virtual ones. Yet, K-Pop

has the opposite effect: it pulls together people from different walks of life to meet and interact through the Internet.

IV. Crazy in Love

Within a group of fans, there is a range of how passionate they are. Usually, fans call these extremely loyal supporters “stan” – a combination of stalker and fan (Lansky 2012). I was lucky enough to have met some “stans” in Korea. Ken calls himself “a big fan” of Taeyeon, the leader of the girl group Girls’ Generation. In past conversations, he revealed that he tries to go to every Girls’ Generation’s concert and has bought airplane tickets to fly to many events around the world, just to get a glimpse of the girls. When the group releases an album, he always buys multiple copies until he gets one with the card of Taeyeon⁷⁴. When asked how much he budgets for the upcoming GG album, he said he is pre-ordering \$200 worth of albums. He also spends a lot on buying the official merchandise of the girls. A good friend of his, whom he met through attending multiple GG concerts, is known for attending every single GG concert to photograph Taeyeon. Another participant, David, told me about his friend whose actions he called not “healthy or realistic.” The friend has a group of friends whom she met through Twitter and other social media sites. She tweets about Taemin, a member of SHINee “a couple times a minute” and constantly “follows [SHINee’s] location, where they are in the world and what they are doing.” David finds the act of “constantly figuring out [the idols’] life without actually knowing them” unreasonable. Most of my interviewees share similar thoughts in that they do not want K-Pop to interfere with their life and goals, it should just be “something that makes you happy” (personal interview). Participant Peter thinks that international fans are less likely to be overly-obsessed because they grew up in the Western celebrity culture where fans

⁷⁴ A lot of K-Pop albums come with small gifts (like a wallet sized photo, a small charm etc.) that feature a specific member in the group. However, the gift is random and hidden inside the album so fans have to buy multiple copies to get the gift of the member they like. It is a sales tactic to boost their album sales.

heavily focus on the idols' music rather than on their looks and personality. Interviewee Joey adds that K-Pop celebrities' personal lives are closely tied to their image, whereas Western fans are more likely to view a celebrity's personal life as separate from their work. Furthermore, Korean fans and Western fans consider different things as praiseworthy or scandalous.

One of the most infamous “type” of K-Pop fans is called 사생팬⁷⁵ (sasaeng fan), which refers to crazily obsessed fans who spend large amount of time and money following their favorite idols and would perform illegal actions to catch their idols' attention. These fans range from students to middle-aged. The majority of them come from East Asian countries and are mostly women. They often skip school and work to follow their preferred artists, paying \$400 to \$800 per day to hire illegal “sasaeng taxis” to trail their artists (Lansky 2012). Many of the very popular artists have around 500 to 1,000 sasaeng fans (Soh 2012). There have been horrific reports from celebrities where they realized that their phone lines were tapped, their car's GPS system bugged, their apartments broken into, or they received letters written with mensuration blood, and have even been injured through car accidents due to sasaeng taxis⁷⁶. The sasaeng fans justify their actions by saying that they can “get closer and get to know better the celebrity [they] love” (ycantyouletitgo 2012). Since the fans follow them so often, celebrities eventually recognize them. The sasaeng fans are looking for that recognition because they believe “being recognized by celebrities is good” (ycantyouletitgo 2012), it is a form of attention and care. While it is hard to pinpoint why such a culture has formed within K-Pop fandom, some of my interviewees believe that part of the problem lies in the lack of regulation regarding fan

⁷⁵ 사 stands for private (hanja 私), 생 stands for life (hanja 生) referring to the fans' obsession on the idols' private lives.

⁷⁶ For more information on what other sasaeng fans did, watch the video from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rp8wZHV3Taw#t=70> and read <http://sg.entertainment.yahoo.com/blogs/singapore-showbiz/sasaeng-groupies-gone-wild-part-1-k-fans-141105992.html>

activities within South Korea. Since few fans get arrested while performing these dangerous acts⁷⁷, they may become more audacious as time passes. Some also say that these sasaeng fans lack a subject/place/organization to healthily express their interest and energy. Another idea is that these fans felt insignificant and overlooked in the large fandom, so they devise ways to stand out from the crowd and feel special.

In addition, K-Pop has a heavy emphasis on idols being communicative, unreserved and always available to their fans. As one of my interviewee once said, “celebrities belong to the fans.” This connects back to Marx’s concept of fetishization – the reason why K-Pop products are valuable is because of the relations K-Pop idols have with their fans. K-Pop would be worthless if fans did not put so much labor into following it, appreciating it and loving it. In return, fans expect their labor to be rewarded by their idols’ giving up their privacy (time, space and even body). Through various types of reality shows, weekly music shows, social portals like Twitter, Instagram, MyStar, Cyworld etc., idols are expected to constantly update their fans about their lives and reveal some personal secrets about themselves. This creates an inherent contradiction where idols are supposed to be unreachable and admired from afar yet also down-to-earth enough to always cater for what fans want. Eventually, the trend enables fans to believe that they own the lives of these idols and the idols should always be available to them.

Overall, K-Pop fandom is a complex and increasingly diverse community, made up of multiple agents – the entertainment company, the fan club presidents, the Twitter gurus who tweet about every move of the idols, the fan photographers who are funded by other fans to capture professional style photos of their idols, the “closeted fans” who hides behind their computer screens... Although K-Pop is the reason why these fans come together on the first

⁷⁷ Celebrities usually do not have the time to figure out who exactly these fans are to sue them in person. It would also attract additional, undesirable attention from the public.

place, the idols are not the only reason why they stay. Fans find meanings and identity through interacting with other fans and participating in K-Pop related activities. Being K-Pop fans in a community together brings them a sense of belonging that they cannot find elsewhere. With the increasing popularity of K-Pop, there will be a larger influx of international fans. As international fans increasingly consume and produce this culture, Korean fans will have find ways to accept these new modes of expression and comprehend that they are no longer the only ones defining K-Pop fan culture.

Conclusion

“This stuff is Mesmerizing”

As I was writing my conclusion for my draft, I was trying to find a way through which I can encompass the many issues in K-Pop I discussed in this thesis. I looked for theories, looked through quotes and listened to my interview materials, hoping that something could help me summarize this paper. Better yet, answer one of the key questions that inspired this thesis: why do people find K-Pop so mesmerizing?

At first, I suggested that K-Pop is excelling because it is consciously striking for the ideal balance between the western and eastern modernity. I compared it to J-Pop and quoted Koichi Iwabuchi in “Becoming ‘Culturally Proximate’: The A/Scent of Japanese Dramas in Taiwan” (2001) on critiquing Japan as being “culturally odourless” (55). I mentioned Yoshimi Takeuchi’s critique on Japanese modernity and the culture’s lack of resistance towards Western influences. I argued that K-Pop is not culturally odourless, as we can see from the music productions, advertisements, reality television shows and even fan culture. International fans can also attest to this because they went through a long way to familiarize themselves with the Korean culture. If anything, K-Pop is a cultural hybrid of which Korea’s androcentric nationalism, painful colonial history and obsession with perfection are mixed into the western modernity we are familiar with. It creates this alluring and distinctive artifact that captures the hearts of so many.

However, the straightforward answer was unsatisfactory. Fans do not follow K-Pop merely because it mixes American Pop well with Korean culture. While the vibrant culture is definitely something we embrace, this thesis has investigated so many other aspects of K-Pop. After laboring over a hundred pages on Korean Popular Culture, I refuse to say, “I don’t know

why international fans follow K-Pop.” Instead, I will say, “I know a part of it, but it is so complex that I can’t summarize it in a word, a sentence or a paragraph.”

Being an avid K-Pop fan myself, there are many times when I find it difficult to criticize K-Pop impartially. After all, why would I be still a fan if I manage to see so many flaws within the culture and the community I am immersed in? If anything, writing this thesis made me realize that I am a fan of K-Pop because it is so broken and contradictory, just like any of us. Others might think that K-Pop is cute and charming, but it actually epitomizes the fetishization of humans, of bodies, of beauty, of sexuality, of virginity, and of Korean culture itself. While the world only sees the glamorous side of K-Pop, fans are constantly submerged in the dirty, deep dark secrets. We know about the slave-contracts, hear about celebrities fainting on stage, read about the saesang fans hurting the idols, and even engage in a fan war online. But these flaws make K-Pop all the more realistic, intriguing and unique.

Perhaps it is Korean’s constantly emphasis on perfection that makes us so aware of the imperfections. The concept of lack and the desire to “confront the lack” is so prevalent throughout K-Pop. Celebrities lack perfection: they are fighting against time, energy, and physical limits to become prettier, more muscular and more popular. Korean women lack mobility: they are looking for ways to break out of the mold within the androcentric society. So that they do not have to choose being either innocent or sexy, a filial daughter or a good housewife, a beautiful or an ugly woman in the men’s eyes. They can be everything they want to be. Lastly, K-Pop fans lack the sense of inclusion, the feeling of being loved. Some tries to complete the gap by fantasizing and living vicariously through dramas and reality television shows. Some try to achieve it through giving all of their love towards the idols, and gratify themselves through the idols’ response/fan-services. Some join fan clubs, online forums, K-Pop

dance groups and other communities to feel included. In all cases, K-Pop becomes a refuge for those are insecure about something in their lives or in their identities. Personally, K-Pop empowers me because it shows me that a person can be incredibly talented at something because of their hard work. Even though that person might seem to have it all, he/she can also be incredibly vulnerable at the same time. We like to face the world with a flawless exterior, but we are well aware of the vulnerabilities we are hiding, and we are not afraid to point them out. K-Pop is a reflection of the problems 21st century youth faces daily: the struggle in showing others an ideal-self, which is only a tiny part of the whole (or sometimes, nothing like the whole).

As a female K-Pop fan, it is often disheartening to see the objectification of women celebrities in the culture. It was so refreshing to hear miss A sing “I Don’t Need A Man” on stage yet upsetting to watch the less popular groups like AOA, Girl’s Day, Dal-Shabet, and Stellar exposing their body just to get more attention. At the same time, I am pleasantly pleased when Korean reality shows start including the inputs of International fans (for example, popular game show Running Man filmed an episode that are designed by a fan from Hong Kong). As an international fan, I believe we should continue to show support while remain critical of the new works. International fans are special because we are able to see most clearly what makes K-Pop so mesmerizing. We should remind others and ourselves what makes K-Pop stands out from Western pop and why did we fall in love with it on the first place. At the same time, we have to realize that K-Pop is ultimately a representation of Korean culture. At times, trends we disapprove will appear. While we can try our best to voice our critiques online, it is ultimately out of our control to bring changes to Korean society.

Where should K-Pop go from here? What should K-Pop do to keep its identity and competitive edge? With the second generation of idols (like TVXQ, Super Junior, Girls' Generations, BIGBANG, Wonder Girls etc.) reaching their sunset years, the future of K-Pop lies on the shoulders of the third generation idols. Many K-Pop fans are worried because the newer K-Pop groups are becoming less distinguishable from each other. People are afraid that original concepts are no longer available and so groups like Orange Caramel and Crayon Pop stand out by doing weird concepts⁷⁸. This might be indicating that K-Pop is heading to another phase, a phase with soloists (like IU, Ailee, Lee Hi, Sun Mi etc.) instead of groups. While I don't think the newer generations can replace the older ones, I embrace changes in K-Pop because so much can be improved from the way it is run now. I am still constantly amazed by new talents, like Akdong Musician and 15&. How should K-Pop keep its competitive edge? How should K-Pop maintain its visual-oriented and dance-oriented elements while improve on its vocal qualities? Or will K-Pop replace the key elements with something else? These are questions that celebrities and entertainment companies have to analyze and answer.

In closing, I will quote another song "Black" from my absolute bias, G-Dragon. It certainly poses a stark comparison to the fearless, blunt and cocky song in the beginning of this paper. After all, we are all hiding something.

사람들은 다 애써 웃지 진실을 숨긴 채
 People smile with an effort, hiding the truth,
 그저 행복한 것처럼
 As if they're happy
 사랑이란 말 속 가려진 거짓을 숨긴 채
 In the word "love," people hide the truth,
 마치 영원할 것처럼
 As if it will be forever

⁷⁸ Orange Caramel's latest concept is sushi. Members are dressed up as fish and they lay on a Styrofoam dish and get wrapped by plastic wrap. This is their music video: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Med2XipHJJM>

Someday 세상의 끝에 홀로 버려진 채
Someday, when I'm left at the edge of the world alone
널 그리워 할지도 yeah
I might miss you yeah
Someday 슬픔의 끝에 나 길들여진 채
Someday when I'm tamed to the edge of sadness
끝내 후회 할지도 몰라
I might regret at the end

- G-Dragon "Black" from G-Dragon Second Full Album "Coup d'Etat" (Daum 뮤직)

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